

REWRITING A MYTHIC NATION: WELSH WOMEN WRITERS  
RECOVERING WELSH MYTH AND FOLKLORE

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the function of Welsh mythology, fairy tale and folklore in a selection of works by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglophone Welsh women writers who choose to engage with such source material. Its aim is to provide a critical response to those recoveries through feminist and postcolonial theoretical readings.

Spanning a century, between 1914 and 2013, its chapters discuss novels by two canonical Welsh writers – Hilda Vaughan, whose work belongs to the first half of the twentieth century, and Alice Thomas Ellis, writing in the second half – followed by two further chapters analysing relevant material drawn from the short story and poetry genres. The final two chapters interrogate novellas by women contributors to Seren Press’s recent series, *New Stories from The Mabinogion* (2009 – 2013) and thus provide an inaugural critical response to that series: I examine contributions by Gwyneth Lewis, Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi, and Tishani Doshi.

Throughout this thesis I argue that in the act of recovering and retelling the source narratives, these writers both draw out issues of gender and nationhood embedded in the originals and explore contemporary issues of gender and nationhood emerging from within their socio-historic contexts. When Welsh women writers select Welsh myth, fairy tales and folklore as mediums through which to comment on those issues as paradigms of gender and nationhood, those paradigms are doubly interrogated. They are examined in the source material and they are woven into new narratives which explore the writer’s contemporaneous experience of Welsh womanhood. Further, Welsh women writers who actively

choose to draw on and recover Welsh myth are, in so doing, rejecting the veracity and prestige of Classical myths and canonised fairy tales as exemplar narratives par excellence. Their choice may be an aspect of a deeper interrogation of discourses of power which underpin all myth and fairy tales.

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*For Rhys and Macsen*

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Anglophone Welsh women writers, such as Bertha Thomas, Hilda Vaughan, Alice Thomas Ellis and Gwyneth Lewis, frequently engage with and recover Welsh myth, fairy tales and folklore to interrogate concepts of gender and national identities. How these writers interweave these aspects of Welsh culture into their writing is suggestive of how they experience Welsh culture and traditions. Myth, fairy and folk tales are often exposed as conduits of hegemonic discourses and so narratives which re-imagine source materials also signal how Welsh women writers critically engage with concepts of gender and nationhood. Such concepts are often renegotiated to present more gynocentric representations of Welsh womanhood.

In reconstituting representations of gender, the Welsh women writers selected for analysis in this thesis are addressing androcentric/gynocentric paradigms as they were positioned at the start of the twentieth century and as they have evolved, both in Wales and other cultures, through to the early twenty-first century. Bertha Thomas, Margiad Evans, Ellen Lloyd-Williams, and Hilda Vaughan, for example, have re-told Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales to comment on the specific condition of Welsh women's social status and Welsh nationhood, as they were experienced at the dawn of the 1900s (which saw the failure of the Cymru Fydd Welsh Home Rule movement in 1899, and the inception of Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, in 1925). Short story writers such as Dorothy K. Haynes, and Hazel F. Looker, published folkloric intertexts just before Wales voted against a version of home rule in its first Referendum (1979) with such fictions suitably exploring contemporaneous notions of 'be careful what you wish

for'. Brought up in North Wales by a Welsh mother and Anglo-Russian father, Alice Thomas Ellis publishes her novels after that failed Referendum. She chose not to engage with wider concepts of Welsh nationhood or feminism. Ellis 'sees fairy mythology as an influential part of the perceived "otherness" of Celtic cultures in Britain' (Armitt, *Contemporary* 133): however, she differs from the Welsh women writers discussed in this thesis because she presents a wholly idiosyncratic engagement with Welsh folklore. With an insider/outsider gaze her approach to Welsh nationhood is problematic and she is often antagonistic to second-wave feminism. This could account for the relative lack of critical response to her works, though scholars such as Lucie Armitt, Sarah Sceats, Peter Conradi, Marion E. Crowe and Katie Gramich do provide literary critical comments on it. Later Welsh women writers, such as Imogen Rhia Herrad, Catherine Fisher, Gwyneth Lewis, Anna Lewis, and Tishani Doshi, present more radical engagements with Welsh myth and fairy tales as they consider Welsh women's status and Welsh nationhood in a new millennium and within the era of Welsh devolution.

Such a focus on gender and indigenous culture necessarily suggests that feminist and postcolonial readings are applicable to the texts selected for study. Accordingly feminist and postcolonial theory will underpin my analysis of the function of Welsh mythology, folklore and fairy tales enabling a discussion of the power balances between the genders in a specifically Welsh context; an expansion of this discussion will include an analysis of how Welsh women writers engage with the evolving power relations between the genders on a wider level. Similarly, within a postcolonial context, how Welsh women writers explore the complex



issue of power relations between Wales and its immediate/domestic neighbour, England, is analysed. This thesis contends, then, that Anglophone Welsh literature written by Welsh women writers who engage with their nation's mythology and folk belief systems often works to present re-focussed gender positions and reconstituted notions of cultural identity, as befits a twentieth- and twenty-first century readership.

When a Welsh woman writer provides a rewritten narrative for a modern-day readership she is also recovering the source material for a contemporary audience. By working with myth, legend and folklore as intertexts in her own narrative she is making those myths, legends and folkloric tales available to a readership potentially ignorant of them. Alerting her reader to the existence of Welsh mythology, legend and folklore, the writer is encouraging the reclamation of Welsh cultural identity for the reader who is Welsh; she is also thus providing a socio-historic education for the Welsh and non-Welsh reader alike (which is not to assume that every non-Welsh reader will by default have no knowledge of Welsh mythology). It is in this way that reworked and contemporised Welsh myth, folklore and fairy tales function in contemporary narratives: epistemological and ontological notions of gender and culture are explored, questioned and repositioned so as to negotiate (or re-negotiate) their definitions and the ways in which they are socially reproduced or enacted.

A key question requires, at this point, further consideration: *why* are Welsh women writers, who are interested in mythology and the feminist recovery and reclamation of mythologies, engaging with Welsh literary and oral traditions? Why are Welsh women writers choosing to recover Welsh culture's literary

artefacts at the same time as interrogating sexual politics and imperialism within their fiction? For what purpose are those specific artefacts drawn upon as the principal site of interrogation? As critics have pointed out, historically women writers have engaged with world myth, most notably Classical myth, with such interest being traced through the Victorian era, peaking during the second-wave feminist movement (this engagement is discussed in detail in chapter one). The Welsh women writers considered in this thesis have chosen instead to work with specifically Welsh tales – with *The Mabinogion*, the oldest example of British medieval prose literature, and with Welsh folk and fairy tales.

A diachronic exploration of these writers' work flags up a paradigmatic shift whereby the treatment of myth, folk and fairy tales loosely parallels theoretical developments in myth, folk and fairy tale scholarship. In other words, early twentieth-century theoretical interrogation of myth and fairy tales perceived such traditions to be monolithic and so early twentieth-century Anglophone Welsh women writers engaged with them as such. Later, as part of a wider questioning of the authority of all monolithic discourses, feminist and postcolonial scholars began interrogating myths, fairy and folk narratives as composite, fluid and transformative. This key change is noted by Diane Purkiss who argues that 'the rewriting of myth [...] can extend to complex engagements with the very place of myth in literature, the place of the woman writer in relation to those discourses, and the displacement of myth as a buried truth of culture' (445). Writing in the closing decades of the twentieth century, Anglophone Welsh women writers reworked myth and fairy narratives whilst reflecting this shift in perception. The

following discussion traces additional key theories which underpin my readings and also locates this thesis within its field of study.

## I

Wirt Sikes, an American anthropologist, conducted a comprehensive survey of the superstitions and folkloric beliefs of Wales in the late nineteenth century. As a peripatetic scholar he interviewed Welsh people regarding their experiences of Welsh supernaturalism and recorded his findings, with illustrations, in his *British Goblins: Welsh Folk Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions* (1880). The folklore that Sikes records often includes multiple variants of the same tale, but he endeavours to trace a thread of the original narrative. For Sikes, the folk, fairy and myth tales he comes across have a monolithic origin as the tales can be traced to an ur-story.

This was followed by W. Jenkyn Thomas's *The Welsh Fairy Book* (1907), a respected story collection of Welsh folk traditions which narrativises the folklore recorded in Sikes's cultural anthropology. As a school teacher, Thomas identified a lack of children's Welsh fairy tale collections: he says that whilst 'young readers are so lavishly catered for, it is a fact that no Welsh fairy book [as of 1907] has been compiled for boys and girls' (W. J. Thomas xi). His collection redressed this and his work has appeared in many subsequent re-prints and editions, most recent appearing in 2001.

Sikes's comprehensive survey, which records variants of source fairy and folk tales, has underpinned my usage of two key concepts in this thesis. The first

is Sikes's classification of Welsh fairies as 'y Tylwyth Teg', translated in English as the Fair Tribe or Fair Folk (Sikes 12). From now on I will use 'the Tylwyth Teg' when referring to Welsh fairies or similar entities (for example, elves or imps) from Welsh folklore. Secondly, I refer to Sike's definition of 'Annwn' in a folkloric sense. In English this is translated as the Welsh 'Underworld or Otherworld' and is a specifically Welsh 'hell, or the shadow land' (Sikes 7) governed by Gwyn ap Nudd. It is a supernatural realm which exists alongside and in parallel to the human realm, often occupying the same space. I also refer to Annwn in a mythic sense, following the example of Sioned Davies who notes that Annwfn (a variant spelling) is the name of the Celtic Underworld. Arawn, King of Annwfn, is a character in the First Branch of *The Mabinogi* (S. Davies 4, 228). Throughout the thesis I will use the Welsh word 'Annwn' to refer to the Welsh Underworld when discussing both mythic and folkloric texts.

Lady Charlotte Guest (assisted by the earlier work of William Owen Pughe) translated *The Mabinogion* between 1838 and 1849, thus creating the first translation of the medieval Welsh texts into English. Davies describes the far-reaching consequences of Guest's translations which popularized the tales by placing them on a European and world stage (S. Davies xxvii, x). Guest's *The Mabinogion* was translated into French (1842 and 1889) and German (1841) thus allowing a comparative analysis of Celtic myth narratives which informed Matthew Arnold's study of Celtic literature; he publically acknowledged his debt of gratitude to her in his *Lectures upon the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) (Guest and John 93). Additionally, Alfred Lord Tennyson was inspired to write

his *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) after reading Guest's translation of 'Geraint and Enid' (Guest and John 119).

Guest's translations achieved high cultural and literary status within the Victorian period and beyond, as it was ninety years before the next translation of *The Mabinogion* appeared (by T.P. Ellis and John Lloyd in 1929). In 1948, Gwyn and Thomas Jones published their standard, scholarly translation, and in so doing recognised that Guest 'took some liberties in producing a Victorian masterpiece out of medieval Welsh' (Guest and John 119). This indicates issues with Guest's translation, the foremost of those being her incorrect usage of *The Mabinogion* as a title for her volumes of collected tales. Guest did not appreciate that 'Mabinogi' is a plural term meaning 'Tales of Youth' and so to annexe the suffix '-(i)on', a common Welsh plural form, was to create a double-plural. Therefore, 'Mabinogion', is 'really a non-word' (Guest and John 97). Over the centuries, however, that non-word has been 'established [as] an extremely convenient way to describe the corpus' (S. Davies x) and so it has been validated through continued usage. Further, Guest created a new text which added to the twelfth-century Four Branches of *The Mabinogi* later medieval romance tales, including the tale of *Taliesin*. Her volumes entitled *The Mabinogion* were not, then, authentic representations of her source material, the Four Branches of *The Mabinogi*. Guest's translation also amended her source tales in order to suit them to Victorian 'notions of devotion, courtesy and protection of women' (Guest and John 98). Whilst Guest made 'available the richness of early Welsh culture [stimulating] an interest in the subject which has lasted and spread' (Guest and

John 93), she did so through a frame of ‘Victorian propriety’ (Guest and John 117).

Due to Guest’s seminal translation work, Welsh women writers who engage with *The Mabinogion* through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries could draw upon later English-language translations by Jeffrey Gantz (1976) and Patrick K. Ford (1977) in addition to those by Ellis and Lloyd (1929), and Jones and Jones (1948). Writers examined in this thesis would have access to any one of these works, according to the eras in which they wrote. Published in 2007, Sioned Davies’s *The Mabinogion* is the most recent translation and includes the Four Branches of *The Mabinogi* as well as the later Arthurian romance tales.

In Sioned Davies’s ‘Introduction’ to her translation of *The Mabinogion*, a socio-historical exposition of the collection’s origins is presented. Davies argues that the relationship between poet and storytelling was enshrined within medieval Welsh laws with professional and amateur storytellers being integral to feasts and gatherings (S. Davies xiv). She provides context for the stories, drawing on Welsh historiography (S. Davies xvii – xxvii) and discusses *The Mabinogion*’s politico-cultural function where the myth’s narrator ‘conveys a scale of values which he commends to contemporary society’ (S. Davies xxvi). Furthermore, Davies emphasises that the Welsh myth tales are split into the initial Four Branches of *The Mabinogi* which contain ‘resonances of Celtic mythology’ (S. Davies x) evidenced through the supernatural, shape-shifting humans, creating women from flowers, giants, magicians, magical beasts, and later material. The next three tales, ‘Peredur son of Efrog’, ‘The Dream of the Emperor Maxen’ and ‘Lludd and Llefelys’ are known as ‘the three romances’ as they correspond to Chrétien de

Troyes's 'chivalric modes of behaviour and knightly virtues [but] they have been completely adapted to the native culture, and remain stylistically and structurally within the Welsh narrative tradition' (S. Davies xi). The remaining four tales, 'The Lady and the Well', 'Geraint son of Erbin', 'How Culhwch Won Olwen' and 'Rhonabwy's Dream' are further divided, with two being Arthurian and two recounting legendary tales relating to early British history (S. Davies xi).

In terms of socio-historic engagements with the Welsh tales, Davies and Guest differ. Davies's 2007 version of *The Mabinogion* draws upon her socio-historical research where she emphasises 'the performability' (S. Davies xxxi) of the tales so that there is a transference of 'rhythm, tempo, and alliteration of the original to the target language' (S. Davies xxxi). Davies has retained the clues to medieval Welsh culture contained in the Old Welsh, so that modern English readers may have a better understanding of the source material and its contemporary context. She has worked the English language to suit the Welsh context. Accordingly, it is to this text I refer when providing précis of source tales and I also follow her example of distinguishing between the Four Branches of *The Mabinogi* and the Arthurian romances. When discussing the Four Branches I refer to them as *The Mabinogi*. When discussing the later tales, or the collection as a whole, I use the term *The Mabinogion*.

Davies's socio-historical approach accords with the work of a number of late twentieth-century second-wave feminist scholars who engaged critically with myth, fairy and folklore and examined such traditions through socio-historic discourses. Such scholars as Marina Warner, Catherine Orenstein, Diane Purkiss, Alicia Ostriker, and Angela Carter have challenged the monolithic view of myth,

fairy and folk tales. Presenting readings of source tales based on extensive anthropological study, they conclude that there are no original versions of any tale. Discussing fairy tales, Carter argues: ‘most stories [...] do not exist in only the one form but in many different versions’ (‘Introduction’ xiv); thus ‘anyone can pick up a tale and make it over’ (‘Introduction’ xi). Purkiss, examining Classical myth, states: ‘a myth is not a single entity, but a diversity of stories told in different times and places’ (441). This echoes Barthes’ assertion that ‘everything, then, can be a myth’ (109). In challenging the homogeneity of centripetal and androcentric fairy, folk and mythic narratives, such critics have also queried the authority of these narratives and thus have demonstrated a shift away from accepting myth (particularly Classical myth), fairy and folk tales as monolithic socio-cultural artefacts.

In this thesis I distinguish between myth tales and folklore (I incorporate fairy tales within folklore). Within a Welsh folkloric context supernatural entities from Annwn live side-by-side with Welsh mortals. This localised and everyday lived experience of Welsh fairies accords with Marina Warner and Catherine Orenstein’s views of fairy and folklore, where fairy tales originated in the domestic realm (Warner, *Beast* 34; Orenstein 8). Bruno Bettelheim argues that myth presents heroes who are elevated above humanity so that ‘mere mortals’ (26) may emulate the mythic theme conveyed. Myth is a ‘majestic [...] spiritual force [of] divine proportions’ (Bettelheim 26). In agreement with these theoretical positions and partially reflecting Susan Sellers’s merging of terms (15), my definition and usage of Welsh fairy and folklore does not distinguish between fairy and folk tales as they are both close to human every-day experience, unlike



myth. I accept myths as narratives of divinities, immortals, gods and demi-gods. Therefore, readings of *The Mabinogion* spring from a different definition from readings of (for example) the Tylwyth Teg, sin eating and changelings. However, my readings accept Annwn as both folkloric and mythic as it is the Welsh Otherworld in which both fairies and gods reside.

## II

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, first-wave feminists challenged the veneration of Classical myth cycles as a repository of masculine ideals, ideals which marginalised women whilst endorsing centripetal misogynist principles of the ruling elite. Isobel Hurst and Amy Richlin provide invaluable analyses of late-Victorian women's engagement with the Classics at a time when Classical myths and language were considered to constitute knowledge capital par excellence (Hurst 17). Modernist women writers such as H.D. and Virginia Woolf wrote against their male peers' admiration for Classical myth by exploring the empowerment of women and relationships between women in their texts. They began questioning myth's authority as homogenous monolithic narratives.

Moving on from the Modernist epoch, between the 1940s and 1970s, the Structural school of criticism examined thousands of fairy and folk tales. Out of these studies came seminal works, such as: the Aarne-Thompson Motif Index (published and revised between 1910 and 1961), Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) and Claude Levi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning* (1978). However, such fairy tale studies did not seek to interrogate fairy tales beyond their

plots and motifs. From the psychoanalytic school of criticism, Bruno Bettelheim presented his *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976). He explored Freudian readings of fairy tales which were applied as therapeutic narratives in his treatment of child patients. To borrow Gwen Davies's phrase, his readings interpreted the stories as playing out 'universal anxieties about [...] child-parent murder' (254).

Second-wave feminist writers and scholars such as Purkiss, Carter and Ostriker, challenged structuralist readings by uncovering myths as models of repression. Welsh women poets, such as Brenda Chamberlain and Sally Roberts Jones, also queried Classical myths as repositories of universal androcentric truths. In Brenda Chamberlain's 'Shipwrecked Demeter' (1958), a bronze bust of the goddess from Classical mythology is physically reclaimed from the seabed. In raising her so too is her narrative recovered. The process of recovering silenced women within myth tales is a popular mode of engagement with myth by feminist writers, whereby rewritten myths become 'retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered' (Ostriker 318). Chamberlain suggests that Demeter's lost and silenced selfhood has grown more resilient and strong as a result of being obscured, so that:

Demeter the mourning mother  
[...] has conserved force from the seabed  
where the dark centuries held her,  
and with salt-burned gaze  
gives, under an older sun, solace. (188)

It is precisely because she has been lost in 'dark centuries' that Demeter can give comfort to the new world into which she has emerged. Sally Roberts Jones's

‘Narcissus’ (1977) interrogates the male poetic imagination and through such an engagement subverts the reverence afforded to Classical myth. Narcissus drowns: ‘Now in the dusk a single body drifts, / Foul, in the muddy pond where no air lifts’ (220) thereby suggesting that both the male poetic imaginary and Classical myth canons are, ultimately, sterile, death-centred and destructive.

Second-wave feminist scholars also challenged psychoanalytic readings, such as Bettelheim’s, for refusing to ‘take into account the gender bias of the genre’ (Sellers 12). This further consolidated feminist scholars’ catechization of myth narratives as bastions of venerated truths. My interrogation of how Welsh myth and fairy tales are entwined in Anglophone Welsh narratives also goes beyond their usage of plots and motifs. As a feminist reading it engages with gender bias in Welsh source tales and their Welsh redactions. It therefore provides a discussion of women writers’ feminist engagements with cultural traditions, but from within a specifically Welsh framework.

### III

I find that the mythic framework gives the story a more universal feel than a strictly realistic treatment of the same idea would do. It widens [a reworked myth tale] out, so that even though the events happen in Abergavenny, or Caerleon, to ordinary, modern people, they retain that odd feeling of relevance through time and space. Rather than hiding behind the myth, the story relives it, reanimates it. In the reader’s mind, it exists anew. (Fisher, ‘Myth’ 43)

Here, Catherine Fisher’s identification of an ‘odd feeling of relevance’ and her concept of the story existing ‘anew’ in its retelling chimes with Ostriker’s assertion that women writers’ engagement with androcentric myth is another turn

in the cycle of mythopoeic evolution (318). Such ideas of continuance and re-living experiences through time and space also accords with Gillian Clarke's engagement with myth. In Clarke's 'Beginning with Bendigeidfran' (1994), she states that: 'being a woman and being Welsh are inescapably expressed in the art of poetry' to which she adds that tales from *The Mabinogi* 'offered [her] a place in myth, and gave myth and naming a place in [her] imagination' (288, 289).

Therefore, Welsh women's engagement with writing and their explorations of voice, identity, culture and historiography often transect their mythic narratives.

Jane Aaron's introduction to the Honno Classics anthology *A View Across the Valley*, analyses the nine collections of Anglophone Welsh short stories which have been published since the 1930s. She asserts 'no acknowledged foundations have been laid for the development of a specifically female tradition in Welsh story-writing in English. But that tradition does exist' (Aaron, 'Introduction' xv – xvi). Similarly there have been Welsh women re-evaluating the mythic traditions of Wales throughout the twentieth century, including, for example; Hilda Vaughan, Margiad Evans (writing in the inter-war years and the first half of the twentieth century) and latterly Alice Thomas Ellis, Glenda Beagan, Imogen Rhia Herrad, Gillian Clarke (the current National Poet of Wales), Catherine Fisher and most recently, Gwyneth Lewis, Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi, and Tishani Doshi. These writers interrogate the mythic traditions of Wales in ways that are similar to their English, European and North American counterparts who interrogate Classical and European mythologies.

Just as Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, Keri Hulme, Margaret Atwood and others have undertaken a (sometimes problematic) feminist project to unmask the

silent and the explicit misogynies of androcentric mythologies (European, World and Classical) so too have Welsh women writers turned their attention to their own culture's story-telling traditions. Jane Aaron argues that Welsh women writers' own culture of androcentric story-telling has excluded them so that they often write from the marginalised wild zone ('Introduction' xiii). Elaine Showalter's concept of women's 'wild zone' in 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' (1986) can, then, be considered key to an analysis of their work; it underpins many of the readings presented in this thesis.

Elaine Showalter makes use of Edwin Ardener's cultural model of the 'wild zone' to represent women's spatial, experiential and metaphysical experiences: it is a space which is literally a no-man's land – forbidden to men. It encompasses 'aspects of the female lifestyle that [are] outside of and unlike those of men' and it is always imaginary (Showalter 262). Showalter states:

through voluntary entry into the wild zone [...] a woman can write her way out of [patriarchal space]. The images of this journey are now familiar in feminist quest fictions and in essays about them. The writer/heroine, often guided by another woman, travels to the 'mother country' of liberated desire and female authenticity; crossing to the other side of the mirror, like Alice in Wonderland, is often a symbol of the passage. ('Feminist' 263)

In recovering and re-centring mythic and folkloric narratives, Welsh women writers reclaim this exogenous space as positive or work to dismantle wider discourses which maintain such exclusionary spaces. This endeavour reflects changes in the more empowered social status of Welsh women in twentieth-century Wales.

According to Deirdre Beddoe,

the last thirty years of the twentieth century witnessed more radical and sweeping changes in the lives of women in Wales than did the previous seventy years put together. [...] But women were not the passive beneficiaries of changes [...]. Women were themselves the agents of change. (159)

As Beddoe shows, political representation of Welsh women by women, across all parties, was dire until 1997 when the Labour Party introduced positive discrimination through women-only short lists in half of their winnable seats (169). 1997 saw the successful referendum for a devolved Welsh Government Assembly and the election of New Labour to Westminster. For Beddoe, the real turning point for women's political representation came in 1999, when the first elections for the National Assembly for Wales saw women take 40 per cent of the sixty seats (170). For the first time in its history as a nation Wales had a political infrastructure of its own and, notes Beddoe, women had a 'strong and visible presence' (170) in the newly devolved Welsh politics.

Despite the suggestion that life for women in Wales changed dramatically in the last decade of the twentieth century, Beddoe concludes that 'it is certainly premature to talk of equality between the sexes in Wales. The old gender hierarchy remains – with men on top' (Beddoe 178). Great strides have been made, in all spheres, which have certainly changed women's roles, expectations and everyday lived experience of their nation and gender. Where advances have been made they are to be celebrated, but 'we should be aware of how far there is still to go' (Beddoe 72).

In an important study of women's writing in twentieth-century Wales, Katie Gramich situates Welsh women's literary output within this socio-historic context, stating: 'In a sense, the women's movement, which began in the previous

decade, can be said to have borne abundant fruit in the outpouring of literary work in both languages by women in this period [1978-1996]' (*Twentieth* 146).

Gramich notes that the changes experienced by women in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and specifically within the 1990s, are iterated within the works of such writers as Menna Elfyn, Lynette Roberts, Gillian Clarke, Joyce Herbert, Merryn Williams, Sharon Morgan, Rachel Tresize, Angharad Price, Mererid Hopwood, Gwyneth Lewis, Siân James, Charlotte Williams, and Trezza Azzopardi, to name but a few. Writers such as Siân James, 'like a number of her foremothers in Welsh women's writing', attempt to 'represent the experiences of female characters who have been rendered voiceless in society' (Gramich, *Twentieth* 169).

These writers' novels, poems and plays, in both languages, directly engage with domestic abuse, immigration and migration (and associated issues concerning race, language and class), sexual abuse, female sexuality and autonomy. They explore the manner in which the higher expectations of late twentieth-century women are still not receiving fulfilment, because the 'patriarchal order of the past, despite the advent of feminism, is by no means over yet, at least not in Wales' (Gramich, *Twentieth* 172). Within Welsh women's writing, in the late 1990s and into the new millennium, 'language politics, notions of nationality and belonging, and the complexities of gender and sexuality all tend to intersect in the literary exploration of Welsh women's subjectivity' (Gramich, *Twentieth* 181).

By interrogating sophisticated revisions of Welsh source mythology, folklore and fairy tales this thesis contends that Welsh women writers re-focus

gender positions, and re-constitute notions of cultural identity within a contemporaneous twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary framework.

Therefore, I suggest that the narratives selected for study function to uncover and re-position contemporary paradigms of gender and culture, in accord with feminist and postcolonial literary critical concepts.

#### IV

Welsh government devolution is often a key contextual feature in Welsh fictions published from 1997 into a twenty-first century in which devolving new powers from Westminster is an ongoing negotiation. It is from within this context that the New Stories from *The Mabinogion* series was commissioned, a decade after the successful referendum which saw the passing of the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the establishing of the National Assembly for Wales. The first novellas in the Seren Press series were published in 2009, three years after the second Government of Wales Act (2006) which created a separation between the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales (<http://gov.wales/about>). The Seren series, germinated within ideological paradigms of resurgent home rule, emerged in the early years of a new political landscape in Wales, at the dawn of a new millennium and a new Welsh Assembly.

In 2006, the addendum in political nomenclature to include ‘Welsh Government’ signals another ideological shift as those words are applied to Wales for the first time in the history of Wales. A Welsh Government did not exist prior to Henry VIII’s ‘Acts of Union’ (1536 and 1543) (Ross 125), and because of



Wales's absorption into the English state, it did not exist afterwards. The extent to which Wales and the Welsh were complicit in this absorption, and in the expansion of the imperialist enterprises of the British Empire thereafter, have been debated in detail elsewhere. It is not the intention of the current argument to recount such debates. For examples of such debates, see Kirsti Bohata's *Postcolonialism Revisited* (2004), Jane Aaron and Chris Williams's *Postcolonial Wales* (2005), and Stephen Knight's *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (2004). Wales was not acknowledged within English governance until 1964 when the Secretary of State for Wales and the Welsh Office were actualised, although with limited power (Ross 245).

The Seren series emerges at a time of complex ideological and politico-social shifts and can be read as a cultural response to these shifts and nation-changing events. Within this new politico-social context, sensing a receptive national, British and international readership, Seren have encouraged Welsh writers to engage with Welsh myth as a way of responding to this new context. Unlike other commissioned collections which look back to silenced or neglected works (like Honno Press's *Welsh Women's Classics* or Parthian Press's *The Library of Wales* series) it demands a rewriting of the recovered text. In this way, Seren's engagement with traditional mythic storytelling traditions draws on 'abundant evidence that ideas of the Otherworld continue to haunt the secular imagination in Wales' (Hooker, *Imagining* 3).

Myth is often used by marginalised collectives to ratify a nationhood. Emyr Humphreys argues that Wales has always been engaged with mythopoeia as it has always been marginalised or in a state of re-definition in opposition to the

influence of external groups (3). Welsh identity has always been defined by its relationship with a dominating other. Linden Peach asserts that a ‘developing sense of nationhood [is often] concomitant with the construction of mythical idealised pasts’ (Peach 16). However, I argue that within the politico-social context of 2006, Welsh writers engage with Welsh myth in a way that signals new complexities at the heart of Welsh nationhood.

How Welsh women writers have woven concepts of nationhood into their mythopoeic responses is a key consideration in my arguments with such analysis traced through the work of wider postcolonial feminist scholarship. Sharon Rose Wilson provides postcolonial feminist readings of world myth, fairy and folk tales in her *Myth and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2008). She states:

Metafairy tales and metamyths remythify intertexts distorted or amputated by colonization, racism, and patriarchy, potentially healing societies. Fairy-tale and mythic intertexts thus foreground sexual politics and other political issues, including those of the postcolonial condition. [...] They connect to the old, wise stories where magical transformation, rebirth, and healing are again possible. (Wilson 163)

Myths, then, refer backwards to narratives of a unified collective whilst recognising the schisms and distortions within a collective.

Within the context of meta fairy tales and metamyths the characters, often presented as fragmented, amputated, marginalised, silenced and objectified beings, come to represent a dispossessed culture and/or nation. Wilson suggests that where a healing process is initiated for the individual, it can be reflected in a wider culture, and vice versa. Intertextual metafiction ‘structure the characters’ imaginative or “magical” release from externally imposed patterns, offering the

possibility of transformation for the novel's characters, for the country they partly represent, and for all human beings' (Wilson 161). Linden Peach draws on woman-as-nation theory when he writes that the 'Welsh woman in her *pais* and *betgwn* [i.e. traditional Welsh costume] became accepted as the symbol *par excellence* of Wales' (16). With reference to both Wilson and Peach's assertions, the main argument of this thesis includes the suggestion that when Welsh women writers enfranchise mythic women within twentieth- and twenty-first-century narratives, they are empowering the nation just as much as they are empowering individual Welsh women.

The texts I explore here are examples of postcolonial and feminist re-workings of Welsh source tales, re-workings which fulfil two major functions. Firstly, they bring to the fore ancient Welsh myth tales and folklore, presenting Welsh cultural heritage to a twentieth- and twenty-first-century world that is concerned with notions of hybridity, plurality and shared community, thus reclaiming within a postmodern and postcolonial context ideas of nationhood bound to the core of the tales. Secondly, as the source material is recovered and presented to a contemporaneous readership those concepts of nationhood are brought forward for the world's attention. They then become open to contemporary readings and interpretation. Marginalised subtexts within the hitherto silenced tales are scrutinised by the Welsh women writers who undertake the reclamation task; indeed, such scrutiny is part of the recovery process, with sexual politics being a prime site of revisionary impulse.

For example, in her twentieth-century narrative, a Welsh woman writer may embed the story of *The Mabinogi's* Branwen, and in so doing not only

presents the original Welsh myth to the reader (recovery), but also reweaves the themes of the original. This reweaving characteristically signals thematic concerns in the original and their undermined and/or subverted status in the reworked tale (reclamation). A Welsh woman writer may engage with the Welsh myth tale's misogyny by giving voice and narratorial view point to Branwen (a common technique of the feminist revision of myth, folk and fairy tales), thereby implicitly questioning the sexual politics of the original Welsh myth, whilst signalling to the reader (who may or may not be Welsh) that such a canon does in fact exist. This example also constitutes a framework for my reading of the texts selected for discussion in the following chapters.

### Thesis Overview

Chapter One presents a detailed theoretical framework which outlines the feminist and postcolonial arguments put forward in this thesis. The Welsh context of the texts selected for analysis is located within wider schools of thought. An exposition of pertinent fairy tale and folklore scholarship is provided with Welsh writing being situated within that school of research. Next, myth scholarship is similarly delineated with a socio-historic contextual comparison of Welsh mythic writing. The final three sub-sections of this chapter explore how in Anglophone Welsh women's writing, postcolonialism and myth intersect, how Welsh nationhood and gender identity are explored, and finally, how Welsh landscapes, identities and myth are figured.

In Chapter Two, the following texts from Hilda Vaughan's oeuvre are explored: *A Thing of Nought* (1934), *Harvest Home* (1936), and *Iron and Gold* (1948). Writing as an upper-middle-class Welsh woman from Breconshire, in the first half of the twentieth century, Vaughan portrays some of her Welsh female characters as having an immutable sense of self, and a resilience drawn in part from their affiliation with Welsh fairy and folk traditions – from the supernatural of the everyday kind, such as that to be found in the seemingly 'ordinary' lakes of mid-Wales, and in the tales of a woman conceiving a child that personifies true love. Myth is treated differently, for its proscriptive gender roles often damage both men and women. I argue that for Vaughan, Welsh myth can be damaging whilst Welsh folklore is empowering.

In Chapter Three, Alice Thomas Ellis's female protagonists cast a disdainful and satirical eye over the moral degeneration of all humanity, and in so doing, they recognise the frailty of human relationships and are able to perceive what others are too ignorant, busy and egotistical to see. What they perceive is a concept of simultaneity: there are two modes of existence, one human, the other supernatural, a concept essential in Judeo-Christian belief systems (Anderson 24). Both modes occupy the same space and for Ellis, raised as she was in North Wales by a Welsh mother and Anglo-Russian father, this space is located in Wales. In her world view humanity and the numinous compete for the right to exist, with humanity ultimately subjugating the numinous to the point where it has disappeared from conscious human awareness. Ellis's texts selected for study include: *The Sin Eater* (1977), *The Birds of the Air* (1980), *Unexplained Laughter* (1985), and *Fairy Tale: A Novel* (1998). For Ellis, who writes from a conservative

Catholic standpoint, the more humanity denies the existence of fairies and other preternatural beings, the more it must deny the existence of an Afterlife, and consequentially the potential for spiritual Redemption.

In Chapter Four, I discuss short stories written by Welsh women such as: Kate D'Lima, Bertha Thomas, Glenda Beagan, Imogen Rhia Herrad, Catherine Merriman, Dorothy K. Haynes, Ellen Lloyd-Williams, Margiad Evans, and Hazel F. Looker. Their stories often explore how characters from Annwn and the human sphere interpose into each other's worlds, with Welsh fairies and humans crossing paths sometimes as friends, and sometimes as enemies. Regardless of the positive or negative outcomes of such interaction, both sides feel the impact of engaging with their neighbour. Tensions between indigenous cultures and incomer influence are explored by emphasising Wales as a liminal space. Short stories by Welsh women writers in the earlier years of the twentieth century uncover latent themes of transformation which in turn explore notions of gender and national identity. In post-Devolution socio-cultural contexts, twenty-first-century stories may trace a forward movement, looking forward to new Welsh paradigms of feminist and national identities.

Chapter Five explores poetry by Welsh women writers and shows how concerns with boundaries, margins, and interstices are coterminous with many of the individual and specific themes presented within each poem selected for analysis. Liminality, rupture, and crossover are figured within discourses which interrogate notions of repression and subjection. Welsh women poets work to uncover the processes by which women may be repressed and subjected through exclusion from the male-centred collective. Consequently, the story of

Blodeuwedd in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* has held a particular fascination for women writers (Aaron qtd. in M.W. Thomas, *Corresponding* 188). Gramich also notes Welsh women's insistent poetic engagement with Blodeuwedd, stating: 'Blodeuwedd becomes, for many writers, a feminist heroine' (*Twentieth* 162). The Welsh women poets presented for discussion explore the causes and effects of such enforced marginality, whether within an androcentric collective or through banishment to beyond its borders. Poems from the following writers are considered: Elin ap Hywel, Christine Furnival, Catherine Fisher, Gillian Clarke, Ruth Bidgood, Zoe Brigley, Glenda Beagan, Rose Flint, Nesta Wyn Jones<sup>1</sup>, Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, and Anna Lewis.

In Chapter Six, I argue that in *The Meat Tree* (2010), a novella published as part of Seren's series of commissioned re-tellings of *The Mabinogion*, Gwyneth Lewis taps into the thematic heart of the original Blodeuwedd tale in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* in her quest to explore transubstantiation and the process of evolution. Seren's series marks a shift in politico-cultural ideologies in Wales, particularly one of national identity post Welsh devolution in the twenty-first century. The series looks both backwards to a mythic past and forwards to the uncertainties of a new millennium. Lewis, who publishes award-winning poetry in both Welsh and English, presents Welsh myth as the site upon which the imagination, conscious and subconscious awareness, technology, identity, and poetry metamorphose into the next phase of humanity's interaction with its myths. For Cardiff-born Lewis, poetry and scientific discovery have never separated: the one has always been no more than a variation of the other. Notions of hybridity

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, Nesta Wyn Jones publishes poetry in the Welsh language, the English language translations of her work from which I quote appear later.

and permeable boundaries, the fallacy of immutable identities and the frailty of human constructions (ranging from religious or social belief systems to the fleshy, physical make-up of a human being) are interrogated in her science fiction novella.

The final chapter explores novellas by Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi and Tishani Doshi. Published in 2011 and 2013, their novellas were also commissioned as a part of the Seren series of mythic re-tellings taken from *The Mabinogion*. Dafydd's text interrogates concepts of identity in the new millennium. The source tales drawn upon by Azzopardi and Doshi feature women who refuse to stay silent and who vocalise disparity, cruelty and unfairness, regardless of the consequences. Azzopardi and Doshi engage with such women who function to interrogate the patriarchal praxes which would silence and subject them, even to their own detriment. In this way both writers fruitfully engage with the Welsh myth tales and provide us with female characters who question the repressive functions of myth, and who understand the complexities and dangers of voice in a world which would enforce silence.

To conclude, this thesis contends that when Welsh women writers choose to engage with Welsh myth, fairy and folk narratives they recover such narratives for their readership. Such recoveries often engage with misogynist and imperialist hegemonies, exposing them in both the source material and in the contemporary socio-political and cultural contexts from which the women write. Their rewriting of Welsh myth and folklore might recentre misogynist and imperialist paradigms so that the previously marginalised becomes centripetal. Consequently, this often involves reclaiming the wild zone as Welsh women writers recast that peripheral



space as positively gynocentric. Ultimately, these activities situate Anglophone Welsh women writers who engage with Welsh myth, folk and fairy tales within a wider field of feminist and postcolonial literature.

## CHAPTER ONE: Theoretical Contexts

### Introduction

The following discussion presents a detailed theoretical framework which supports my readings of the material selected for analysis. Feminist and postcolonial literary criticism which interrogate notions of identity and which challenge centripetal androcentric paradigms are especially useful in a discussion of how Welsh women writers rework Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales in their Anglophone texts. Consequently, both theories are woven through my expositions of myth, fairy tale and folklore scholarship. Such expositions draw on Welsh socio-historic contexts when situating Welsh mythic and folkloric literary traditions within those fields of scholarship. The chapter concludes with an exploration of intersecting paradigms in Anglophone Welsh writing, such as: Welsh mythopoeia and postcolonialism; Welsh nationhood and feminist identity; and Welsh landscapes, identities, and myth.

As discussed above, my arguments work from the entwining of fairy and folklore, but take myths as being discrete entities in their own right. For my purposes fairy and folk tales are quotidian, taken from the gynocentric domestic sphere, whilst myths present grand narratives of machismo featuring immortal demi-gods and illimitable magic. Scholars who have recently published research in the field of fairy tale and myth studies have taken differing approaches. Some have conflated fairy tale and myth, while others have maintained their distinctions. For example, Susan Sellers draws no distinction between ‘myth and

fairy tale as the terms seem currently synonymous, even though [there are] important differences in their historical evolution' (16). But Sellers, for example, also recognises that happy endings are peculiar to fairy tales and that there continues to be a gendering of both tale types, with myth being seen as masculine and fairy tales as feminine (16). Sharon Rose Wilson uses the terms fairy tale and myth 'as they are traditionally used by folklorists', drawing on fairy tales as wonder stories (märchen) and myths as stories believed to be true, sacred, and taken as etiological explanations of 'creation and the world' (Wilson 2,2). Like Wilson, I define *The Mabinogion* as a cycle of myth narratives which refer 'to aspects of history of popular or social culture [as they are] traditional stories often used as intertexts rather than myth as language, speech, or semiological system' (Wilson 2). Furthermore, as this thesis examines myth and fairy tales by Welsh women writers, my use of the terms refers to their status within specific socio-historic Welsh contexts. Definitions of myth and fairy tales have been evolved through studies of European and world myth canons and fairy tale traditions. Whilst Robert Graves's important study, *The White Goddess* (1948), recovers Welsh myth for a twentieth-century audience, Welsh myth canons and fairy tale traditions have not been included in those studies which have evolved definitions of myth and folklore.

There is an inherent complexity in defining the Welsh myth tradition of *The Mabinogion*. Like Sellers, I have found Bruno Bettelheim's definition of myth to be useful. Here, Bettelheim distinguishes between myth and fairy tale, stating:

in myths, much more than in fairy stories, the culture hero is presented to the listener as a figure he ought to emulate in his own life, as far as possible. [...]The myth presents its theme in a majestic way; it carries spiritual force; and the divine is experienced in the form of superhuman heroes who make constant demands on mere mortals. (26)

This accords with the presence of supernatural beings with superhuman powers in most of the tales in *The Mabinogion*, but it does not fit with Davies's assertion that the Welsh tales, within a Welsh context, were to be performed through 'complex [and] dynamic' (S. Davies xiv) oral storytelling traditions performed in formal and quotidian settings. Bettelheim (and others who are discussed in detail in the following subsections) presents mythic characters as superior, with humans as inferior, but this is not always the case in Welsh myth tales. There is a paradox within Welsh mythology where it is cognate with Classical myth as expressing the divine, but is also common and grounded within Welsh communities. My definition of myth acknowledges this dichotomy. In this thesis, I take Welsh myth as encompassing divine supernaturalism within everyday human experience – within Welsh mythic traditions supernatural entities and events are natural. This is also thematic throughout the texts selected for analysis, with Welsh women writers often drawing out this unique naturalised supernaturalism in their reworkings of source tales.

Wirt Sikes's comprehensive survey of the superstitions and folkloric beliefs of Wales in the late nineteenth century describes engaging in the cultural landscape of Wales in terms of immersion, of a 'sinking' (4) into its fairy and folklore. Sikes presents a much naturalised belief system which is ubiquitously tied to Welsh nature and landscape. Sikes asserts that Welsh folk beliefs and their attendant fairytales onomastically reflect a landscape where can be found, for

example: y Tylwyth Teg yn y Coed (Fairies of the Wood) (12), Tylwyth Teg y Mwn (Fairies of the Mine) (12), Cwm Pwca (Elf Valley) (20), and Coblynau (mine knockers) (24), to name just a few. Ultimately, supernatural entities from Annwn live side-by-side with Welsh mortals. This localised and everyday lived experience of Welsh fairies accords with Marina Warner's view of fairy and folklore, where fairy tales originated in the domestic realm (the gender implications of this position are discussed in detail below), in the 'neighbourhood, the village, the well, the washing place, the shops, the stalls, the street' (Warner *Beast* 34). Catherine Orenstein states that 'fairy tales are devoted to the mundane: the drama of domestic life, of children and courtship and coming of age' (8). In agreement with these theoretical positions, my definition and usage of Welsh fairy and folklore does not distinguish between fairy and folk tales.

The succeeding sections of this chapter present an overview of the literary criticism, schools of literary theory, socio-historic contexts and primary literary sources drawn upon to illuminate readings of the selected texts, and to explore my overarching arguments.

### Fairy Tale and Folk Lore Scholarship

Late twentieth-century fairy tale scholarship has enabled literary critics to argue that fairy tale redactions have been, and continue to be, a prime locus of attack on misogynist patriarchal hegemonies by women writers. Writers from colonised cultures have also worked to question their coloniser's influence through re-visioning fairy tales. Welsh women writers have selected tales of supernatural

Wales to comment upon contemporaneous cultural presentations of gender and nationhood. Working within the rich tradition of Welsh fairy tales and folklore, they have engaged with, for example, the tales of the Tylwyth Teg and the many accounts of the Welsh numinous and Annwn outside the world of myth per se. This exposing and interrogation of discourses of power, specifically misogynist and colonial discourses, places Anglophone Welsh women writers within a wider twentieth-century feminist literary tradition of recovery and reclamation of gynocentric and indigenous fairy tale narratives. Such a feminist literary tradition has been evolving since the mid-nineteenth century with its development retrospectively analysed by second-wave feminist scholars.

In the Preface to his *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004), Donald Haase suggests that ‘since 1986, fairy-tale scholarship focused on women has significantly expanded, not only in terms of the quantity produced but also in terms of its scope, variety and complexity [so that] the time has come again to draw a new map of the field’ (ix). Prior to 1986, Haase identifies the work of Jack Zipes and Kay Stone, in particular, as providing a contemporaneous overview of the field and asserts that no such overview has been attempted since, despite the apparent developments in the literary output of narratives and the criticism of them (ix). His edited collection of essays attempts to redress this situation, although his work is, of course, not unique in this endeavour.

In the opening decade of the new millennium many fairy tale scholars have published various accounts of the literary fairy tale, scholars such as: Sharon Rose Wilson, Christina Bacchilega, Kevin Paul Smith, Catherine Orenstein, Susan Sellers, Stephen Benson, Jack Zipes, Donald Haase, Lucie Armitt and Marina

Warner, to name a few. However, the field of fairy tale scholarship remains a new phenomena, despite there being a long tradition of women writers working within the fairy tale tradition. Socio-political, historical and literary discourses, which form the basis of fairy tale scholarship, were developed from the mid-twentieth century and provided the tools needed to analyse the fairy tale tradition that can be traced back for centuries.

In his analysis of women's engagement with the tradition, Haase notes that

clearly there has long been a tacit awareness of the fairy tale's role in the cultural discourse on gender, and many fairy-tale texts constitute implicit critical commentaries on that discourse [...]. [One] of the achievements of feminist fairy-tale scholarship has been to reveal how women – for three hundred years at least – quite intentionally used the fairy tale to engage questions of gender and to create tales spoken or written differently from those told or penned by men. (viii)

Drawing upon Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analyses in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and particularly emphasising their study of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jack Zipes reiterates Haase's claim that feminist redactions of fairy tales precede the twentieth century. Zipes identifies literature in the nineteenth century which 'experiments with the traditional fairy-tale repertoire that could be called feminist' (Zipes, *Don't Bet* 13). He adds that:

aside from a long tradition of matriarchal tales that were printed and continue to be printed in folklore collections of various lands, there were feminist precedents set in the literary fairy-tale tradition by the end of the nineteenth century. [...] Thus, the contemporary feminist fairy tales have drawn upon a rich tradition of feminist tales or tales with strong women which may not be widely known but which have nevertheless provided models and the impetus (along with the feminist movement itself) to challenge the dominant male discourse. (Zipes, *Don't Bet* 13)

Donald Haase also draws on Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* to emphasise their suggestion that writers such as the Brontës, Jane Austen and Frances Hodgson Burnett used fairy tale structures and motifs as intertexts in order to subvert reductive gender roles and explore female identity (Haase 20). Victorian women writers' engagement with fairy tales can be read as an attempt to steal back the power to represent themselves in everyday terms and to refocus everyday relations between the genders.

Haase propounds that the advent of second-wave feminism instigated new readings of the literary tradition; consequently such new debates encouraged women writers to continue 'asserting and subverting ideologies of gender' (vii) through their revisions of fairy and folk tales. From a Welsh perspective, in a 1979 monograph on the Welsh writer Allen Raine (the pseudonym of Anna Adaliza Evans), Sally Jones situates Raine in a Welsh literary tradition prior to 1915 and analyses the fairy and folk metanarratives woven through her fiction. According to Jones, Raine's *A Welsh Singer*, published in 1897, has Cinderella as a source text and *Hearts of Wales*, published in 1905, features the Welsh folk tradition of sin eating (S. Jones 50). Within the context of literary traditions, Raine is apparently writing from within a first-wave feminist gynocentric praxis of engaging with fairy and folktales. Writers such as Hilda Vaughan, Margiad Evans and Bertha Thomas as well as Allen Raine, all Welsh (or aligning themselves with Wales), published fairy tale and folk tale narratives, or metanarratives, prior to second-wave feminist activities. In their work there is evidence of their recovering and recuperating of Welsh fairy and folk lore. Such women writers, and their work, were contemporaries of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir and



therefore were also part of the long line of women writers who sought to recuperate fairy and folk tales prior to the 1970s' development of gynocriticism.

Emergent second-wave feminist movement literary criticism of fairy tales and their re-visions can be viewed as a reaction to earlier fairy tale studies, studies which did not seek to interrogate fairy tales beyond their plots and motifs. Such early studies from the Structuralist school of criticism came from Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, and the narratological theories of Vladimir Propp. Just as Claude Levi Strauss 'in a series of ground-breaking investigations conducted from the 1940s to the 1970s, worked on thousands of myths from around the world in an attempt to articulate their common format' (Sellers 6), so too had Propp presented his *Morphology of the Folktale* in the original Russian in 1927, with subsequent translations in later decades. Although similar in aim, that is, to make 'accessible to every fancier the [folk] tale, provided he is willing to follow the writer into the labyrinth of the tale's multiformity' (Propp xxv), there are syntagmatic and paradigmatic differences between the studies.<sup>2</sup>

Through empirical analyses of the collected tales the field of scholarship widened and unprecedented critical attention became focussed on the folk and fairy tales of Europe. Contemporaneously, Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson of the Scandanavian folklorist school had published their folk tale index (*Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index*) in 1910, with a further translation (by Thompson) appearing in 1928. The index was an attempt to 'tabulate and classify systematically story types and motifs within the stories' (Warner, *Beast* xviii).

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the differences between the theorists and their influential studies see Alan Dundes's introduction to the second edition of the English translation of Propp's *Morphology* (1968, reprinted in 2009, xi - xvii).

Orenstein notes the relationship between the folk tale and the fairy tale, in which fairy tales are considered, in folklorist terms, to be a subgenre of the folk tale canon, a genre that is distinct from legend, myth or nursery rhyme (8). Folklorists who emphasise the oral sources of fairy tales classify them according to plot; the *Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index* labels them ‘Tales of Magic’ and numbers them 300 – 749 (9). However, Marina Warner and Catherine Orenstein have both indicated fundamental issues with this purely formalist reading of the folk and fairy tale tradition.

Warner has expressed her distrust of the empirical stance which denies the tale’s malleability and fluidity, and the erratic nature of tales, as they unexpectedly ‘spring up’ in a culture or community. Nor does the scientific view allow for socio-historical and political readings, nor for teasing out latent meanings of the tales that encapsulate not only ‘broad elements of human experience but also the particular details of each day and age [and] collective truths’ (Orenstein 12). Orenstein also points out the importance of acknowledging that fairy tales evolve to match new cultural landscapes (12) and thus can be read both diachronically and synchronically, for as

pen meets paper, characters freeze in time [...]. Text is forever locked in context. Storybook heroines acquire not only a period wardrobe but also a date, author, presumed audience and worldview [as] fairy tale heroes and heroines record the mentality of their day. (13)

Thus when Welsh women writers engage with issues of gender and nationhood within their socio-historic context and recover neglected Welsh stories to do so, they also draw out implied parallels between their own comments and

presentations of gender and nationhood ‘locked in’ the recovered source tale. Interrogations of the source tale itself and the culture from which it (supposedly) springs may also form part of the Welsh writer’s revision.

In her introduction to her edited collection of fairy tales Angela Carter emphasises how fairy tale structures withstand, even encourage, the influence of individual authors, editors, translators, storytellers and redactors, upon those structures so that they continue to function on a public and private spectrum (‘Introduction’ xvii). Fairy tales are resilient and are, somewhat parasitically, able to adapt to their host in order to survive. Advancements in technology and media may contain ‘the source of a continuation, even a transformation, of storytelling and story performance. The human imagination is infinitely resilient, surviving colonization, transportation, involuntary servitude, imprisonment, bans on language, the oppression of women’ (Carter ‘Introduction’ xxi). To return to the metaphor, if a fairy tale is a parasite whose survival depends on its ability to adapt to its host, the ever-evolving human imagination is the perfect host for an ‘organism’ that depends on change for its survival. Orenstein argues that Bettelheim, like his peers, failed to recognise that fairy tales are mercurial and apt to change. She states that such tales ‘adapt to the weather, to local fashions, and to the mindset of each new teller and audience. They are not just psychological blueprints [...] They express our collective truths, even as these truths change beneath our noses’ (Orenstein 12). This chimes with Carter’s assertion that fairy tales are ‘dreams dreamed in public’ (‘Introduction’ xx) and implies that fairy tales are dramatisations of the collective and individual imagination; if they are

humanity's dreams incarnate, then they must evolve to mirror the human condition.

If Welsh women writers who engage with fairy and folk tales utilise such tales to comment on their own experiences as women and as Welsh nationals, then Carter's comments on fairy and folk tales broaden our understanding of those engagements. Their comments may often be informed by colonial impacts on Wales, which can be traced through, for example: prohibition and taboos placed on the Welsh language issues, women and men's 'involuntary servitude' (Carter 'Introduction' xxi) in the domestic realm and the heavy industries of Wales respectively, and ideological clashes between Welsh nationals and the 'ruling' English. This last example includes: Chartist uprisings in Merthyr Tydfil and Newport, the campaign against toll-booth tithes resulting in the Rebecca riots of west Wales, the 1847 Report on the State of Education in Wales, strikes in the southern coal fields and northern slate quarries, and the flooding of the north Welsh Tryweryn Valley to provide reservoirs for Birmingham and Liverpool. These examples, which lie very near to the surface of Welsh culture, may well have provided Welsh women writers with the required inspiration for their fairy tale redactions.

As has been discussed at the start of this chapter, women writers' engagement with the tradition of fairy and folk tales springs from a different context from engagements with myth. Fairy tales had long been associated with women story-tellers (Carter 'Introduction' x): society, calling them 'Old Wives' Tales [...], allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it' (Carter 'Introduction' xi). Subsequent male appropriation of

both the tales and their mode of dissemination (that is from the oral to the literary in eighteenth-century Europe) meant that women writers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were involved in a recovery of their usurped roles. Women writers who engage with fairy and folk tales do so from the position of the usurped rightful 'heir' to a tradition that had been passed through generations of women matrilineally.

Moreover, fairy and folk tales are by definition mercurial and with each generation, each telling, women have been involved in casting new forms of the tale. The tales, whilst belonging to a tradition and being part of a larger tale complex, are also representative of the individual teller and their cultural and personal context. Orenstein argues that 'every act of unravelling also, inevitably, involves casting a new spin. What's more, the authors who first put the fairy tale to print were themselves interpreters, spinning yarns as they saw fit' (Orenstein 15). Thus Orenstein compares tale-telling with the wider female tradition of weaving to highlight the fact that when women writers rework fairy and folk tales, they can be seen to be picking up the threads from where they left off.

Recent scholarship has given increasing attention to issues of nationhood within fairy and folk tales, along with issues of cultural imperialism and colonisation. Since the closing decades of the twentieth century a critical discourse that named and gave representation to colonial and postcolonial analyses of occidental and world tales has become embedded in the literary critical debates. Just as second-wave feminism instigated a recovery and uncovering of gender bias in such tales and provided a critical discourse for their analysis, advances in postcolonial schools of thought have also precipitated a

recovery and uncovering of cultural bias within fairy and folk tales, and likewise developed critical language as an interpretative and investigative tool.

Wilson, writing in her *Myths and Fairy Tales in Contemporary Women's Fiction: From Atwood to Morrison* (2008), includes a chapter on postcolonial identity in the fiction of Doris Lessing. In Lessing's work, argues Wilson, numerous examples can be found of how feminism, postcolonial theory and fairy tale scholarship have segued into one another, corroborating the suggestion that postcolonial discourse has increasingly influenced feminist and fairy and folktale analysis over recent decades. Andrew Teverson presents a postcolonial reading of Salman Rushdie's fairy tale fiction suggesting that postmodernist and postcolonial discourses overlap. Teverson writes that fairy and folktales:

exhibit a native hybridity and a formal liminality that tend to reinforce the claims of those who see cultural identity as an ongoing and unending negotiation of differences and to offer a riposte to those ideologues who would insist upon cultural purity and cultural segregation. (54)

Critical discourses that uncover and scrutinise gender *and* colonialism within fairy and folk tales allow new readings of Welsh women writers' revisions, particularly as Wales is a problematic example of a colonised culture and a coloniser of other cultures. Resultant tensions within fiction by Anglophone Welsh women which engages with issues of national identity and citizenship prove to be acutely interesting.

In the concluding section of his introductory chapter to his 2004 collection of edited essays, Haase suggests specific forms of future enquiry that may encourage new critical approaches to be undertaken by fairy tale scholars. Such

modes of enquiry include: reception studies whereby scholars may ‘assess the impact of feminism and feminist criticism itself on the way contemporary readers experience fairy tales’ (Haase 28); further co-operation between folklorists, anthropologists and literary scholars; a focus on comparative, multicultural and transnational research that shifts away from occidental societies; recovery work that uncovers neglected material within Western cultures and those of world cultures also. It is a purpose of this thesis to consider Welsh women’s engagement with Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales as an act of recovering neglected works.

### Classical Myth Scholarship

Myth narratives comprise a different tradition and present a discrete epistemology from that of fairy tale scholarship. Welsh women’s rewriting of Welsh source tales often signal a rejection of Classical myth. When a Welsh writer chooses to ignore Classical myth and instead work on indigenous Welsh tales, there is an implied critique of the Classics vaunted as exemplar narratives par excellence (Hurst 17). To discuss how Anglophone Welsh women uncover and interrogate phallogentric hegemonies within and surrounding Classical myth, it is vital to locate such rewriting within myth studies.<sup>3</sup> This following section draws upon

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful exposition of the many and varied approaches to myth which have evolved since the Victorian era, see Susan Sellers’s introduction to her *Myth and Fairy tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2001) or individual texts by: Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Straus, Juliette Wood, Diane Purkiss, H.D., Carolyn Larrington, Barbara G. Walker, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Marjorie Garber, Jack Zipes, Marina Warner, Christina Bacchilega, Karen E. Rowe, Paul K. Smith, Catherine Orenstein, Sharon Rose Wilson, Angela Carter to name just a few.

pertinent scholars who focus on how Classical myth has been specifically used to marginalise women.

In *Myths and Nationhood* (1997) George Schöpflin delineates a useful definition of myth and places his exposition within the context of human collectivity. His account is useful precisely because it considers the role of myth within social groups (specifically nations), and provides ways of thinking about the function of myth when writers engage with mythic narratives as source material for their own fictions. For Schöpflin, mythology

begins from the proposition that there are certain aspects of our world that cannot be encompassed by conventional rationality. Various processes, ideas, values, mechanisms and so on remain hidden from customary modes of scrutiny and yet have significant implications for the way in which individuals and collectivities live. (19)

One of myth's functions, then, is to narrate a collective's reality through mirroring; reality is refracted through myth's prism-like fictionalising qualities and is reflected back to the collective. The reflection can be skewed so that those who govern the collective can obscure the ways in which the collective's value system is created and maintained. Such an encoded value system customarily endorses the ruling elite's right to govern and must therefore endorse the status quo. In other words, myth is manipulated by the status quo to justify their hegemony and to hide the justification process.

To draw upon a notorious example, in the 1930s and 1940s 'Germanic mythology [was] hijacked by Nazi ideologues' (Larrington ix) to justify and



support their allegiance to paradigms of racial purity.<sup>4</sup> Cultural manifestations of the value systems within, for example, education, religion, medicine, history and art, are influenced by the myth narratives put forward by the ruling elite. The inculcation of myth narratives becomes a cyclical process whereby myth reflects reality and constitutes reality.

Angela Carter follows a similar mode of reasoning in her exposition of myth's cultural function as it refracts relations between the genders. Carter asserts that patriarchal 'myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances. In no area is this truer than in that of relationships between the sexes' (*Sadeian* 6). Carter therefore suggests that the obscuring of reality is deleterious to both genders, but is particularly injurious for women.<sup>5</sup> Uncovering this stratagem she argues that

if women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to codes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission [...]. All the mythic versions of women [...] are consolatory nonsenses. (*Sadeian* 5)

According to Carter, then, when it comes to maintaining a status quo that is agreeable to a patriarchal collective the obscuring of a reality that is prejudicial to women becomes a necessary strategy for all men within that collective, and through being consoled, women are complicit in their own submission. The ruling

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Larrington provides a further analysis of this example and its relation to the appropriation of Scandinavian myth in her chapter 'Scandinavia' in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*. London: Pandora, 1992. 118-161.

<sup>5</sup> See Carolyn Larrington, Susan Sellers, Sjo Mor, Marina Warner, Juliette Wood, Proinsas Macanna, Patrick K. Ford, Rachel Bromwich, Sioned Davies and Barbara G. Walker for informative studies on goddess mythology.

elite of an androcentric society must perpetuate consolatory myths in order to maintain their own eminence within the community. Women must accept those myths as reflections of universal, primal ‘truths’.

Within Anglophone Welsh writing the works of mid-Wales writer Hilda Vaughan provide an interesting example of these ‘consolatory nonsenses’ being uncovered as just that. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, in the inter-war period and beyond, and some 50 years before Carter’s *Sadeian Woman* (1979), Vaughan interrogates the function of myth and the myth corpus itself by presenting a complex relationship between the genders; tensions between the genders are often symbolised by drawing upon myth topoi. Characters such as Megan (*A Thing of Nought*, 1934), Eiluned (*Harvest Home*, 1936), and Glythin (*Iron and Gold*, 1948), are exalted as goddesses by their husbands and would-be lovers, and yet they are not the powerless and objectified goddesses of Classical myths, of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (1948), for example – they are not consoled into inaction by their mythic status and, ultimately, they refuse the definitions imposed upon them by men.

When Victorian and New Women writers sought to reconstitute myths to reflect a more gynocentric experience, they were working with absolute unknowns; to try to imagine a more emancipated and fulfilling existence required creative thinking. Such women ‘had no models for this kind of existence’ (Hurst 198) as ‘there are no myths about the successful career woman who has children and remains an individual’ (Lefkowitz qtd. in Hurst 198). Therefore if myth is a primary method by which a ruling elite establishes and maintains its high status, then myth too can become a focal point for those who wish to confront and

interrogate the status quo. Reconstituting myths becomes a direct affront to that status quo whose right to rule is attacked through developments of counter ideologies.

Women writers who engage with androcentric myth exhort their readers to question the rationale that excludes, so that they ‘look at, or into, but not up at sacred things’; in so doing women readers and writers alike ‘unlearn submission’ (Ostriker 331) to the collective and the mythologies that buttress its patriarchal authority. Rewritten myths become ‘retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival’ (Ostriker 318). Women writers may draw strength from their marginal position, from their relegation to the domestic and from that which is denied within a myth – the irrational and unconscious features of a myth tale – and use such strengths to question the definitions imposed by an androcentric elite, imposed in order to vindicate the superiority of patriarchal hegemony.

Women writers, like the Welsh poets Brenda Chamberlain and Sally Jones, ‘have used Latin and Greek to strike back at the empires of patriarchy and colonialism; this is one place where the master’s tools have been used to dismantle the master’s house’ (Richlin 266). Similarly, Purkiss contends that:

the rewriting of myth cannot be limited to the rewriting of particular favoured or disliked figures. It can extend to complex engagements with the very place of myth in literature, the place of the woman writer in relation to those discourses, and the displacement of myth as a buried truth of culture. (445)

For Purkiss, the most successful strategies of rewriting are the ones that involve demoting the venerated status of myth where ‘the identification of the myth with

the average and the ordinary perverts it from being represented as the dark continent of male civilisation' (452).

Welsh women often reject Classical myths as unrepresentative of their experiences as Welsh women. This rejection of Classical myth in favour of indigenous Welsh myth accords with Purkiss's suggestion that in order for women writers to reclaim individual myth tales, and the woman's role and function in the myth corpus, they must 'challenge and change the discourse of myth in literary culture by asking who can know the truths of myth and who can articulate them' (451). However, Welsh tales of *The Mabinogion* are articulated by ordinary Welsh people and draw upon every day experiences of common folk; they are an odd combination of fantastic and social realist fictions (S. Davies xiv). It is questionable, then, how far Welsh mythology can be accepted as a venerated depository of 'narcissistic [...] male poetic mastery' (Purkiss 451). Welsh myths do not impose a hegemonic influence from an exalted position but instead engage their audiences from a more equal position.

Commenting on the gender and class bias inherent within a Classical education, Amy Richlin states that 'the desire for Latin and Greek in the Euro-American educated classes derives from exclusion: historically, when men were taught Classics, their sisters were not' (267). Within the traditions of literature, as it elucidates and validates patriarchy, Classical mythology becomes knowledge capital, a term taken from socio-economic theory as put forward by Pierre Bourdieu in his influential text, *Distinction* (1979). Bourdieu suggests that 'the old style autodidact was fundamentally defined by a reverence for culture which was induced by an abrupt and early exclusion' (84). This determination to

undermine the ivory towers of male intellectualism can explain why women writers have so persistently turned to Classical mythology when they have chosen to rewrite myth narratives. Celtic mythologies, along with those of other non-Classical cultures, lack the eminence of the Classics and did not – indeed still do not – carry the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 82), or knowledge capital, of their Greek and Latin equivalents.

In order to define itself and legitimize its dominance, an elitist patriarchy exerts a hegemonic influence over women, lower classes, and foreign cultures/nations through appropriating the aestheticism of Greek and Latin mythologies. Therefore, when a woman writer engages with Classical myth she is attempting to participate in the literary community from which she is excluded, and in so doing, is seeking acknowledgement and approval from her literary peers. She is attempting to work with ‘the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, denied to women’ (Richlin 265), and to acquire through subterfuge, the knowledge capital denied to her because of her gender. The literary myth canon that acts as a repository for a Classical education becomes the exemplar against which the quality of literature is to be measured. It is to this standard that women writers must aspire if their work is to be acknowledged by the androcentric literary community; acknowledgement is key if the work is to be scrutinised and deemed worthy of admission to the canon.

Myth narratives have also been refigured by Modernist and Imagist writers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Women writers who belonged to these groups of artists were also engaged in using myths intertextually within their writing. Modernists were motivated to question literary and cultural traditions

within their creative work and mythopoeia was fundamental to this process. When male Modernist writers drew upon Classical myth to recall, and regret, a lost epoch they were immediately working within traditions that bestowed prestige upon male creativity and masculinity.

Within the Modernist and Imagist movements, women writers and artists were treating myths differently from their male peers; they were subverting literary and cultural traditions with a gynocentric agenda. Tracing the ways in which proto-feminist Modernist writers wove mythic intertexts into their fiction, Tina Barr argues that Virginia Woolf ‘successfully appropriates a modernist method of composition, the mythical method, and turns it to her own personal and feminist purposes of representative self-empowerment’ (145). This proto-feminist agenda can be charted throughout the Modernist period to the 1960s through the work of H.D., with her *Helen in Egypt* (1961) demonstrating clear interest in mythical methods that interrogate the misogynist paradigms, upon which are based Classical mythology and cognate patriarchal cultures. H.D. referred to *Helen in Egypt* as her ‘Cantos’ (Friedman 164), an allusion to Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. repudiates by implication much of Pound’s ideals of fascism and the patriarchal Confucian perspective (Friedman 173). Influential women writers in the opening and mid-decades of the twentieth century were still questioning the authority of patriarchal systems and were still doing so in woman-centred terms – but the focus had shifted from subverting the educational system to interrogating Modernist dicta.

Modernist gynocentric myth fiction influenced writers of the second wave of the Women’s Movement and provided a vocabulary of resistance, interrogation

and power. Gynocentric political, educational, economic, historical, literary critical, and medical discourses began to emerge. And just like the evolution of fairy tale scholarship at this time, such discourses allowed women to explicitly ‘reveal, confront, and interrogate’ (Barr 128) patriarchal myths and to exercise the critical tools given to them by their predecessors. Welsh women writers were part of this emerging tradition and actively sought to add their own comments and perspectives on nation and gender, whilst uncovering neglected Welsh tales, thus subverting Classical myths and their attendant truth claims.

Referring to Welsh cultural capital, canon building and how medieval Welsh literature has functioned in the formation and re-formation of Welsh national identity, Helen Fulton draws upon Thomas Parry’s Welsh-language *A History of Welsh Literature to 1900* (1944). Writing in the twenty-first century, Fulton describes how Parry identified, collected and presented Welsh-language medieval texts to create a Welsh literary canon which defined and ‘valorized cultural and class identity’ (205). Parry was radical in paying serious attention to *The Mabinogion* in his early twentieth-century compilation as he recognised ‘the value of aligning [the tales] with the great literary treasures [of an] aristocratic European tradition’ (Fulton 214). He, in turn, was building on Matthew Arnold’s work in which the Welsh canon, ‘its antiquity, its poetry, its aesthetic value, its intrinsic difference from the English tradition – were reinforced’ (Fulton 220). Parry’s ‘radical’ and comprehensive canon building project has meant that *The Mabinogion* sits at the heart of what is deemed to be Welsh cultural capital, despite its contemporary dissemination through everyday storytellers. Fulton states: ‘the potency of this narrative for Welsh writers, writing in both Welsh and

English, can be measured by the many adaptations and remediations of medieval Welsh literature in modern and contemporary writing in Wales' (223). Just as the Welsh literary canon has been continually re-formulated to keep pace with the changing paradigms of nationhood, so too have medieval tales been subject to re-visioning projects.

Welsh women writers who rework Welsh myth tales are part of this project: as the Welsh canon continues to evolve so too do their recovery and reclamation of those tales. Such recovery and reclamation is cognate with, and influenced by, their contemporary notions of gender and nationhood. These women writers may engage with 'tales of the Mabinogion [which] speak of a pre-existent sovereign nation whose ghostly form can be resurrected through modern iterations' (Fulton 223). Even so, in a post-devolution Wales, Fulton identifies a 'renewed sense of nationhood' and looks forward to contemporary writers 'find[ing] a new articulation' (224, 224). This thesis explores how Welsh women writers are engaged with looking back to their source tales to uncover latent themes and power imbalances. These writers scrutinise the tales and rework them into recuperated narratives – this in itself is part of the Welsh tradition. They are also engaged with looking forward so that their recuperated narratives are new articulations that 'bear witness to a seminal period of the history of Britain' (Fulton 224) and which reflect gender and national identities befitting a twentieth- and twenty-first-century Wales. The Welsh women writers presented in this study are therefore part of wider feminist recovery and reclamation project which can be traced through Welsh and Classical literary canons.



### Welsh Contexts: Classical Myth

English mythology is itself palimpsestic where the Greek tradition became elided with the Roman tradition which was then culturally transmitted during the Roman occupation of Britain. Instead of turning to older myth cycles more in keeping with Saxon tradition, for example Beowulf, the elite evolved veneration for the Greco-Roman. Nevertheless, although Classical myth has been used to exclude according to social class and national identity, the following section provides an exposition which elucidates how Classical myth has been invoked by English elitism to subject women and Wales as an internal colony. This elucidation will open up postcolonial readings of the Anglophone Welsh texts selected for analysis in this thesis.

Hegemony may invoke mythology to maintain a system of male elitism but this is not the only form of elitism propped up by myth. Where two (or more) nations are closely associated there exist ‘contact zones’ where there is cultural interchange between them (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 131). Issues of colonialism and gender intersect where myth is at play; for just as power relations between the genders historically favour the male, so too do they favour the more powerful nation – mythology is called upon in both instances to justify and ratify that inequality. Where there are inequalities between collectives which are defined as nations, a woman of the subaltern nation is doubly marginalised. Sara Mills, in *Gender and Colonial Space* (2005), notes that within a colonial context, indigenous women have experienced, constructed and have been allocated different spatial relations (33). A woman writer who belongs to the subaltern

nation who wishes to engage with her nation's inferior status may then encounter a tension whereby her own status within the assimilated nation, which she seeks to empower through her writing, is marginal. The Welsh woman writer who wishes to recuperate her nation's mythology must not only navigate through issues surrounding her gender, but also those of her nationhood.

Over the last decade there has been a range of debates concerning whether Wales can be viewed as a colonised nation or not; these contentions have focussed on (but are not limited to) linguistic, cultural, historical and social/material paradigms. Such debates have been significant in exploring the varied and contentious theoretical concepts of Welsh nationhood, from the Acts of Union (1536 and 1543), to the 1979 failed Devolution referendum, to the success of the 1997 referendum. Scholars such as Stephen Knight, Daniel G. Williams, Jane Aaron, Dai Smith, Chris Williams, and Kirsti Bohata have published on this contentious issue over the past twenty years, and it is a debate which shows little sign of being settled. Aaron and Williams's co-edited collection of essays *Postcolonial Wales* (2005) is a useful starting place to develop a critical perception of Wales as a postcolonial nation, as is the '16. Review Symposium: *Postcolonial Wales*', published in *Contemporary Wales* (2007). In the symposium Dai Smith and Mark Leslie Woods provide a critique of the collection, and Chris Williams and Jane Aaron provide defences and responses to those critiques.

My position is that Wales is postcolonial and this underpins my reading of the function and role of English culture's imposition of Classical mythology upon Welsh culture. I draw on Kirsti Bohata's "'Psycho-colonialism" Revisited' (2005), which argues that:

the validity of a postcolonial discussion of Welsh writing in English is not dependent on showing Wales was once a colony or is now a post-colonial [country]. The relevance of postcolonial criticism in Wales [...] is to be found in specific and detailed engagement with the array of postcolonial ideas in the context of Welsh literary and cultural specificities. (34, 39)

I am persuaded by Bohata's useful comments on postcolonial literary analysis of Anglophone Welsh writing which perceptively draw on Welsh, and wider, postcolonial/post-colonial discourses.

The English ruling elite has traditionally insisted (and in some quarters, still does insist) upon the eminence of the Classical languages (Greek and Latin) and Classical mythology, resulting in the esteemed status of both in the English and Welsh education systems. Only the most gifted male of the middle and lower classes could traverse the dividing line to access an elite education. However, their national and class origins were ineradicable and so they could never attain full membership of the elite. Problematically, their education and resultant affiliation with the elite meant they would return to their kin altered as one who bore the marks of an elitist training. They existed as misfits, irrevocably transformed and at home nowhere. In this sense Classical myth in the English school system and wider culture:

can be an instrument of identity transfer. [...] Modernization, the shift of the peasantry from the countryside to the towns, is an illustration of this. By the same token, through myth the assimilation of ethnically different groups is accelerated, as the myth-poor community accepts that upward social mobility demands the abandonment of its culture, language and myth-world in exchange for something superior [...]. (Schöpflin 22)

Whilst I do not wish to suggest that Wales is myth-poor (it is not, as the history of *The Mabinogion* will testify), this notion of abandoning a native mythology to become assimilated into a ‘superior’ culture through adopting its myth traditions is significant when it is viewed from a Welsh perspective, and becomes particularly interesting when the debates surrounding internal colonialism are brought to mind.

Personal disadvantages experienced by a Welsh national, disadvantages caused by their subordinate relation to the ruling elite and their Classical education system, become symbolic when viewed as a potential signifier for the Welsh nation. As an example of the personal and political tensions induced by the threat of cultural assimilation, the novella by Bertha Thomas, entitled ‘The Way He Went’ (1912), explores the consequences for a Welsh man of traversing the dividing line between nations, cultures and classes, and in doing so makes an overt political statement.

The story centres upon a Welsh lad, Elwyn Rosser, who is inheritor to Welsh land and knowledge, being the latest in a long line of learned and professional men. His innate mental and physical capabilities prove him to be a natural scholar and sportsman, both of which mark him out as an ideal candidate for a (Welsh) state sponsored private education in England. Schisms and tensions appear in every aspect of his life; each scission, it is suggested, springs from his inability to reconcile his native Welsh identity and the English elitist system into which he was inducted at a formative age. As Isobel Hurst argues, the English education system was founded upon the bastions of Classical languages and texts, and became the guardian of such knowledge capital:

Eton, Winchester, Rugby, and other public schools founded during the Renaissance with a humanist curriculum based on Latin and Greek remained key institutions for educating men of the Victorian aristocracy, gentry, and clergy. A cheaper alternative for the middle classes was the endowed grammar schools, which provided a very similar education. (17)

It is within this environment that Elwyn's Classical education is gradually, and formally, embedded.

In Bohata's *Postcolonialism Revisited*, in which she applies postcolonial theory to an analysis of a range of Anglophone Welsh literature, Bertha Thomas's novella is presented as a testament to the personal and public tensions inherent in 'self-division, alienation and partial assimilation' (130). Bohata notes that the 'role of education in the process of acculturation' (*Postcolonialism* 130) is vital to Thomas's ideas of fragmentation of the self and community. For Thomas, Elwyn's suffering is presented as a warning to the gifted young Welsh male of the spiritual dangers posed by assimilating a coloniser's culture and as a result becoming hybrid. This disapproval is particularly telling when Elwyn's mother, Mrs Rosser, questions an Oxonian tutor regarding the worth of her son's education. She asks:

'What was the principle – the object of it?'  
 'General culture, Mrs Rosser,' returned the tutor, as one smiling from a height, stooping to conquer, 'general culture on a sound classical basis. [...] I don't say that the University is the place for everyone [...] but I have always regarded your son, with his imaginative and his literary temperament, as one of those for whom Greek and Latin were especially designed by Providence. [...]'  
 Macpherson spoke of the Greek temper, of the training of the mind, the high qualities their authors had power to instil into the student, the gain to his general intelligence, mature judgement, foresight, lucidity of thought and expression – the importance of maintaining lofty standards and ideals [...]. (B. Thomas 'The Way' 54)

In this passage, Thomas is implicitly rejecting the veracity and prestige of Classical myth and is suggesting a deeper indictment of the ways in which Classical myth is used to subject Wales and the Welsh people. This recalls Gwyneth Tyson Roberts' scholarly study of the 1847 government *Report into the State of Education in Wales* (known as 'The Blue Books'), in which she notes that, 'in the Commissioners' terms, the Welsh working class were an unthinking mass and therefore less than fully rational beings' (184). Macpherson implies that Elwyn was rescued from a lowly and confused state. He speaks as a coloniser who rationalises his colonising praxis through discourses of salvation.

This reading of Bertha Thomas' 'The Way He Went' has drawn out specific postcolonial concepts which are applied to readings of the texts presented in the following chapters, the most pertinent concept being that Welsh women writers, similar to Thomas, can imply that Classical myth is inappropriate and unrepresentative of their experiences of Welsh nationhood. This is cognate with wider postcolonial feminist reclamation activities where women writers creatively 'conceive and labour and deliver themselves' (Gubar 311). The following section examines Welsh identities with regard to how they interweave with Welsh mythic, fairy tale and folklore narratives. If a Welsh woman writer draws upon such Welsh source materials, in what context do they exist?

### Welsh Contexts: Postcolonial Mythopoeia

Raymond Williams, an eminent Welsh literary theorist and writer, argues that the

land now known as Wales, the people now known as Welsh, have experienced over those long centuries so many major changes of use and condition that continuity, except in the language, and even there in eventual decline, seems a merely mythical construct. (28)

Williams here presents a paradox. To define Wales it must first be acknowledged that Wales is impossible to define. Wales as a coherent nation state is non-existent; Wales is essentially fragmented and its unity has proven to be transient. Wales is, and has always been, in a process of dissolution and reconstitution. Apart from the language as signifier (and a questionable one at that, as the majority of Welsh people have ‘lost’ their Welsh language), it seems that to be Welsh is to claim a complex national identity, an identity that is hardly cogent and is inherently laced with schisms and uncertainty. Even as a sub-nation which resists consolidation within the ‘old nation’ (Anderson 3) of Great Britain, it resists coherence in itself. Continuity has proven to be elusive and, to follow Williams’s schema, this suggests that a Welsh person’s claim to ‘Welshness’ requires a caveat, as in, ‘I am Welsh but according only to its current definition – tomorrow this definition may change.’ Wales ‘imagines’ (Anderson 6) itself to be tenuous; it is telling of Welsh identity that it is ‘distinguished not by [its] falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which [it is] imagined’ (Anderson 6). Following Williams’s and Anderson’s theoretical positions, Welsh identity

imagines itself as incoherently coherent: it is synonymous with tenuity and yet that constitutes a defining feature of Welsh nationhood.

Bohata asserts that power relationships between two cultures which come into contact are likely to be unbalanced and that the colonising nation may also appropriate cultural artefacts belonging to the subaltern nation (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 131). This cultural interchange means that the colonised nation's mythology is often assimilated into the coloniser's and thus the subaltern nation 'loses' its claim to that myth system. Davies notes the imperial nature of Charlotte Guest's translation of *The Mabinogion* which was part of a wider Romantic Revival project that 'resurrected [ancient] manuscripts [...] to show the 'colonizers' that the 'colonized' were civilized' (S. Davies xxviii). Robert Graves suggests that cultural imperialism, with specific regard to the repression of indigenous mythic religions, was a colonisation strategy well established by the time of the Roman Empire. Such strategies were central to the advance of the Roman Empire as 'the Romans made a regular practice of discovering the secret names of enemy gods and summoning them to Rome with seductive promises, a process technically known as *elicio*' (Graves 49). Not only do Welsh women writers uncover neglected Welsh source tales, but they may endeavour to reclaim an assimilated source tale previously incorporated into English narrative traditions.

Bohata draws upon Prys Morgan's history of eighteenth-century Wales as it describes 'the profound effect upon Welsh culture of English appropriation of Welsh stories and traditions. [These] aspects of Welsh culture [were] *lost* to Wales; assimilation in this instance was a form of cultural robbery' (Bohata,



*Postcolonialism* 131). Matthew Arnold was notably complicit in this appropriation, for whilst he:

helped to create a cultural context in which the founding principles of the medieval Welsh canon [...] were reinforced as legitimate criteria [...] he was also true to the colonialist spirit of the age [...] regarding the “Celts” as [...] children or whimsical spirits [who] could not be trusted with self-government. (Fulton 220)

For Prys Morgan this era’s cultural robbery is exemplified by the legend of Arthur:

filched by the English, and transformed into an English hero, now the Tudor dynasty turned Welsh princely tradition and prophesy to their own ends. [...] The consequence was that the Welsh no longer appeared to have a distinct history, but only traditions which were either discredited or merely contributory to English traditions. (Morgan qtd. in Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 132)

Because of the cultural interchanges that always favoured the colonising nation, ‘Welsh culture, raided for its “valuable” artefacts, its useful stories, whilst being derided for less “desirable” attributes, was seen as inferior to English culture’ (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 132). Power relations between the nations fall in favour of England and the imposing of Classical mythology upon the Welsh combined with the ‘robbery’ of indigenous Welsh myth traditions have been detrimental to the visibility of Welsh cultural traditions, including its mythology.

Emyr Humphreys contradicts Schöpflin’s theory of national power relations where mythopoeic endeavours are undertaken solely by ruling nations and are utilised to ratify a dominating collective’s power over a subjected collective (20). English cultural assimilation of the Welsh traditions is an example of this. Humphreys argues that Wales’s mythopoeic traditions are undertaken

from a marginal position to counteract hegemonic influence, where a ‘developing sense of nationhood [is often] concomitant with the construction of mythical idealised pasts’ (Peach 16). In his influential literary and socio-historical study of Wales entitled *The Taliesin Tradition* (1983), Humphreys posits mythopoeia to be actively engendered by colonised nations, by those who are not favoured in the interchange between cultures and nations. He states that:

the manufacture and proliferation of myth must always be a major creative activity among a people with unnaturally high expectations reduced by historic necessity, or at least history, forced into what is often described as a marginal condition. In fact this marginal condition is now the essence of the human condition [...]. In Wales history and myth have always mingled and both have been of equal importance in the struggle for survival. (Humphreys 3)

Emyr Humphreys argues that Wales has always been engaged with mythopoeia as it has always been marginalised or in a state of re-definition in opposition to the influence of external groups, and its identity always has been one defined by its relationship with a dominating other.

This finds some echo in Raymond Williams’ sense of Welsh identity as fragmentation, tenuity and flux. A protean identity is, paradoxically, a defining feature of Welsh identity and Welsh mythopoeia is a process by which Welsh people attempt to cohere their disparate identity. What is different about the Welsh endeavour is that the Welsh are marginal and do not mythologise from a dominant position, but do draw upon myth in ways that are similar to hegemonic usage, that is, to ratify an identity and community through myth, or as Williams refers to it, ‘cultural tradition’ (R. Williams 30). However, at the end of the twentieth century disunity is, in fact, becoming common among all nations, even

in the ‘once dominant and assertive peoples’ (R. Williams 29). Consequently Wales’s specific usage of, and relationship to, its own mythic traditions will be mirrored in dominant nations as they begin to face existential issues of identity dissolution similar to those faced in Wales.

This section has so far examined Welsh identities with regard to how they interweave with Welsh mythic, fairy tale and folklore narratives whilst exploring the context from which such narratives spring. I argue that the context is one of fluctuation and fragmentation which provides Anglophone Welsh women writers with a rich source of ambiguous source material. Such ambiguity affords writers opportunities to explore inherent tensions and to celebrate, or lament, plurality. Complex, antithetical and straightforward representations of gender and nationhood through re-worked myth, fairy and folklore are the result.

C.W. Sullivan III suggests that ‘if we can conceive of mythology as traditional narrative that allows people to discuss (not explain) [...] topics, we will be much closer to understanding the general function of mythology’ (78). Anglophone Welsh women’s writing, then, can be placed within a more recent critical framework which argues that myth’s function is transitory and contextually defined. Myths may be read and interpreted diachronically and synchronically; the constant evolution of myth is the only constant feature of myth. Susan Sellers in her *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2001) draws upon the work of Marina Warner and Roland Barthes to put forward her own view of what constitutes a myth. Sellers describes Warner’s view that myth:

can operate as a lens onto human culture in its historical and social context, binding the reader in stock reactions or else providing the starting point for new tellings. [...] By scrutinising myth we can work to loosen its negative strangleholds, sew new variations into its weave and jettison those myths that cannot be satisfactorily altered. Warner insists that any new tellings are at least as authentic as those of antiquity which themselves derive from a long tradition of borrowings and mendings, and that this tailoring is an activity we should all engage in. (7)

The idea of actively shaping myths through incorporation of new tales and/or motifs, and the deletion of tales and features that do not fit, is apposite for the Welsh people as their making and re-making of community and identity has depended upon a cultural tradition that is itself an ongoing process of tailoring. In other words Welsh mythology is ever evolving because it is a mythos and because it reflects and coheres Welsh identity which is protean and apt to change (a survival strategy evolved through its colonised context).

### Welsh Wild Zones

Commenting on the thematic elements to be found interwoven throughout the short stories in the edited collection *A View Across the Valleys: Short Stories by Women From Wales c.1850-1950* (1999), Jane Aaron suggests that the stories composed by Welsh women writers and selected for inclusion in the anthology share a common trope: that of Welsh women possessing an affinity with the natural landscape of Wales. This view is mirrored by Jeni Williams who notes that within Hilda Vaughan's novel *Iron and Gold*, specifically, there is presented a 'gender-inflected vision of a non-industrial Wales [and its] rural community [which] interrogate[s] the interwoven texts of *national* and gender identities'

(‘Intertexts’ 9 original emphasis). Welsh women writers, including Hilda Vaughan whose *A Thing of Nought* appears in Aaron’s edited collection, often express an affinity with the natural physical environment of Wales through their central characters. These characters:

frequently identify, and feel most at home, with natural rather than human phenomena [and] many forge ‘unfathomable friendships’ with the natural landscape [...]. To such an extent is this the case that if one were compelled to choose one image that might most characteristically represent the many ways in which Wales has been imagined or has known itself [...] it would be this image of the wild zone which would be likely to predominate. (Aaron, ‘Introduction’ x)

The wild zone is introduced by Elaine Showalter who defines it as the ‘place for revolutionary women’s language, the language of everything that is repressed, and for revolutionary women’s writing’ (Showalter, *Feminist Criticism* 262, 263). In addition to Aaron’s comments on Welsh women’s short stories, it also resonates with my interrogation of Welsh women writers who rewrite myth narratives.

These writers are often positioned outside the patriarchal centre; firstly because they are women, secondly because they are women who write, and thirdly because they write by drawing upon myth in a revisionary fashion. To be a woman and to occupy the wild zone is to view the androcentric collective from a paradoxical position, being neither part of the collective nor utterly excluded from it; women remain merely peripheral. Not only is this true of Welsh women’s short stories, but it also holds for those writers who engage with Welsh folklore and fairy tale in their contributions to the anthology.

Hilda Vaughan engages with the storytelling traditions of Wales in order to interrogate gender and nationhood discourses within those traditions. She also

directly engages with the culture, landscape and physical spaces of Wales.

Vaughan recounts her experience of engaging with all three as the inspiration for her short story/novella *A Thing of Nought* (1934), a narrative that ‘is generally thought to be one of her finest pieces’ (Aaron, ‘Notes’ 278). Vaughan states:

One day [...] I was riding up a lonely little road between two high walls of hills in a remote Welsh valley. A stream ran beside the road, the noise of its peat-stained waters, and the mewing of a solitary buzzard overhead were the only sounds that broke the stillness, except for the sighing of the west wind. Suddenly, round a bend in the road, I came across one isolated farmhouse; it was whitewashed – the only white object in a vast green landscape. Facing it, upon the other side of the stream, was a gaunt, square chapel, built of grey stone, with the caretaker’s cottage clinging to its side – as a little shell might do to a strong rock. Something about those two lonely dwelling-places and that chapel, to which I imagined black-clad men and women coming from far away along the solitary road on a Sabbath, stirred my imagination. (Adam 81)

The valley conjured in the narrative as ‘Cwmbach’ (Vaughan, *A Thing* 13) (in English, ‘Little Valley’) is a ‘locational symbol’ (Knight 43) of Vaughan’s Breconshire, but is also closely based upon an actual scene, a tangible combination of Welsh landscape, place and architecture stumbled upon by Vaughan which she ‘was not even conscious of when [she] wrote [the] story’ (Vaughan qtd. in Aaron, ‘Notes’ 278). The scene and its interplay of culture, nature and imagination had been germinating ‘for fifteen years’ (Vaughan qtd. Aaron, ‘Notes’ 278) within Vaughan’s unconscious until it found creative expression in the form of a story about the transcendental (specifically the potential for pure love to become manifest in human form).

The relationship between the physical landscape of Wales, its mythology, folk and fairy tales, and the extent of a writer’s awareness of that relationship

directly impinges upon the relative success of any revisions that the writer may undertake. As a scholar working within the field of myth studies, Marion Wynne-Davies recognises that it is crucial for a writer who is attempting to engage with Welsh mythology, to also engage with the culture from which it springs. Wynne-Davies recounts in the opening section of her text, *Women and Arthurian Literature: Seizing the Sword* (1996), how her own grandmother would tell stories of King Arthur, stories found ‘not in any book’:

her tale was told as if she knew the shepherd who had found the cave with the sleeping hero, as if the event had happened when she was a child, and as if there could be no doubt about its authenticity. [It was] spoken in the evening by the fire. Like many women storytellers she relied upon an oral tradition to communicate her narrative, and it is only by chance that her grand-daughter became a university teacher and chose to inscribe this particular tale in an academic textbook. (1)

Not only has Marion Wynne-Davies’s grandmother internalised the tale by recounting the events of the narrative as if they were lived historical fact, but in listening to the tales as a child, and then presenting them within her own scholarship, so too has Wynne-Davies. This chimes with my earlier comments which drew on Carter’s assertion that fairy and folk tales are ‘dreams dreamed in public’ (‘Introduction’ xx), they are dramatisations of the collective and individual imagination and evolve to mirror the human condition. Wynne-Davies goes on directly to relate this internalising process to her adult interpretation of Welsh myth, stating ‘this personal vignette has, of course, a deeper significance for my own understanding of the role of women in Arthurian literature, both as authors and as characters’ (2). The ‘of course’ suggests that a personal connection

is an obvious and direct cause of greater comprehension; it is the difference between an empathetic and a merely sympathetic reading of the Welsh legends.

Sikes argues that in order for anyone to successfully collate a nation's beliefs one must first earn the trust of the people. In order to achieve this

you will sink down to the level of common life [and] there you will find the same old beliefs prevailing, in about the same degree to which they have ever prevailed, within the past five hundred years. To sink to this level successfully, one must become a living unit in that life [...]. Then one will hear the truth from, or at least the sentiments of, the class he seeks to know. (4)

Sikes's description of engaging in the cultural landscape of Wales in terms of immersion, of 'sinking', suggests a topographical image. Sikes has metaphorically 'sunk' into the culture of Wales (presenting a somewhat essentialised colonialist, and therefore sentimental, version of Wales), and presents this process of immersion by evoking physical experiences of the country.

For Vaughan, Wynne-Davies, and Sikes, the interested scholar and the writer alike must both engage on an emotional, physical and intellectual level with the topography of Wales. And this is particularly true if a scholar or creative writer wishes to engage, in a meaningful way, with Welsh mythology, Welsh fairy and folk tales. In fact, for many critics and artists this physical and psychological symbiosis is an imperative process when working within Welsh myth traditions.

This notion is further complicated by those writers who inhabit an insider/outsider gaze; their bifurcated gaze presents a complicated expression of their nationhood, where there is never a straightforward claim to Welsh nationhood. Hilda Vaughan, for example, is a Welsh woman who was raised in a



fairly privileged household in mid-Wales, but lived most of her adult life in London and returned to Wales for family holidays and when she intended to write. Alice Thomas Ellis (a pseudonym, her real name was Anna Haycraft), half-Welsh on her mother's side, was born in Liverpool but raised for seventeen years in North Wales. She married an Englishman and lived most of her adult life between London and North Wales. Her Catholicism rather than her nationhood is the inspiration behind much of her writing: her Welshness is conditional on Wales being a liminal space. In other words she is Welsh for as long as Wales provides a link between physical reality and the supernatural.

Symbiosis between Welsh landscape, place, culture and the numinous as it is represented by Welsh women writers who enjoy a more straightforward claim to Welsh nationhood is often presented as a psychical or extrasensory encounter, and often differs from that of the 'outsider' or 'insider/outsider' gaze. As Welsh women writers approach notions of gender and nation through their engagement with Welsh myth, folk and fairy tales, possible tensions are identified and explored within the scope of this thesis. Less problematic, or more straightforward engagement with such identities, are also interrogated and set against those who, intentionally or not, demonstrate more complex engagements.

## Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have presented an overview of pertinent literary criticism, schools of literary theory, socio-historic contexts and primary literary

data in order to illuminate readings of selected texts and to explore my overarching argument.

Ultimately I argue that Welsh identity is formed through a process of ongoing coalescence and so it is a mythic endeavour, which draws upon consolatory and unifying narratives. As noted above, mythic narratives are also malleable and protean. These features of Welsh identity suggest a peculiar and specific relationship between the Welsh people and their imagined identity; it is both notional and definite, and is thus a mythic paradigm. A Welsh woman writer drawing upon Welsh myth tales to comment upon her experience of her gender and nationhood may, consciously or not, present the complexities, ambiguities and antagonisms that underpin a Welsh woman's identity. I suggest that when Anglophone Welsh women writers revision Welsh myth, fairy tales and folklore they may explore Welsh identity as both mythic (illusory) and Mythic (an authenticating narrative).

Within the work of Welsh women writers there may be presented an intention to celebrate the discontinuity that defines Welshness and yet that may conflict with an inherent need to cohere that which is dissonant. The following chapters explore how myth, fairy tale and folklore intertexts demonstrate the terms upon which Welsh women writers imagine, define and iterate their gender and national identities.

## CHAPTER TWO: Welsh Myth and Folklore in the work of Hilda Vaughan

### Introduction

Hilda Vaughan's engagement with Welsh myth, fairy and folklore presents an idiosyncratic interrogation of those traditions with this examination often reflecting her complex experience of Welsh nationhood. Vaughan's reworking of Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales also demonstrates a critical engagement with evolving power relations between the genders, often located within the domestic sphere and played out through husbands and wives, would-be lovers, and maternal relationships. Welsh women are figured as having an immutable sense of self which is affiliated to everyday domestic supernaturalism. Indeed, these women draw resilience from their affiliation with Welsh fairy and folk traditions.

Vaughan draws upon Welsh folklore, fairy tale and myth to interrogate constructions of gender and their manifestation in socialised gender roles, often critiquing them for their divisive and restrictive influence. Welsh landscapes are integral to Vaughan's narratives in which Welsh supernaturalism often springs from the natural environment, with lakes, streams, valleys and seascapes proving to be catalysts for metaphysical events. Lucy Thomas, in her study of Vaughan, argues that this idiosyncratic relationship with Welsh nature can be traced to Vaughan's childhood, where she often felt 'immersed in the Welsh landscape' (5). I argue that engagements with Welsh nature, myth, fairy and folklore are a means of negotiating and renegotiating presentations of gender and nationhood in Anglophone Welsh fiction and, therefore, wider Welsh socio-cultural contexts.

In monographs by Christopher Newman (1981) and Lucy Thomas (2008) both scholars delineate Vaughan's biographical context in detail. Hilda Vaughan was born in Builth Wells, in 1892, to a respected country solicitor and small landowner, Hugh Vaughan Vaughan and his half Scottish, half English wife, Eva Campbell (Newman 1). As an upper-middle-class young girl, Vaughan was home-educated by a succession of European governesses who, under instruction from Vaughan's authoritarian mother, taught her modern European languages so that she was not influenced by the Welsh language (L. Thomas 6). Vaughan volunteered as a land-girl during the First World War and worked to recruit new members offering 'the girls good health, good sleep and good complexions' (Beddoe 67). In 1922 she moved to London where she enrolled on a writing course and met Charles Morgan, who was already a novelist and critic for *The Times*. They were married in 1923 (L. Thomas 9): her first novel, *The Battle to the Weak*, was published in 1925. Hilda Vaughan enjoyed a successful writing career, even publishing and finding literary acclaim when residing in America during the Second World War. There Vaughan published *The Fair Woman* (1942), which appeared in Britain under the title *Iron and Gold* (1948). Her last novel *The Candle and the Light* was published in 1954. Charles Morgan died in 1958, leaving Vaughan a widow for almost thirty years. She passed away in 1985 (Newman 74, 76).

Hilda Vaughan's interrogation of constructed identities of gender and nationhood is often played out in the domestic sphere within marriages, families and close-knit rural communities. Lucy Thomas has noted that whilst Vaughan was a gifted and celebrated writer, it was her husband, Charles Morgan (a novelist

and playwright) who commanded more commercial and *literati* attention (11). Although Vaughan and Morgan would often share their creative endeavours, editing and inspiring each other's work, Thomas writes that 'while [Charles Morgan] was enthusiastic about his wife's narrative abilities and despite her successes in her own right, there is a suggestion that Vaughan was somewhat in her husband's shadow' (L.Thomas 11). No doubt in part as a consequence of her personal experience, relationships between men and women, and between husbands and wives, are the site upon which Vaughan interrogates balances of power.

In her novels, prominence is often given to individual women who explore how far they are willing to acquiesce to men, to imposed gender roles, and to social and familial conformity. Within the texts selected for discussion in this chapter, Vaughan often presents a lone woman who discovers a limit to how far she will be compromised by external restrictions on her selfhood and nationhood. Welsh myth, folklore and fairy tales are often pivotal in her discovery of that limit and in affording her strength to resist imposed definitions.

Throughout Hilda Vaughan's writing there can be traced a thematic interest in folklore and myth so that her narratives are often intertextual. These intertexts can be discerned, for example, in her early texts *Here are Lovers* (1926) and *The Soldier and the Gentlewoman* (1932). In *The Soldier and the Gentlewoman*, primogeniture excludes Gwenllian Einon-Thomas from owning her family's estate, and so in order to strategize how she may secure an inheritance, she instinctively retreats to a circle of yew trees in the grounds of her family's farm. Yew trees are often associated with supernatural powers and are aligned

with ‘strong chiefs in war’ (Graves 40, 42), a significant connotation with regard to the novel’s themes (not least the novel’s title). Gwenllïan considers the yew circle ‘a glorious place to hate in [as] no breeze entered [and] no bird sang’ (Vaughan, *Soldier* 37). From this enclosed space, Gwenllïan finds confidence in her abilities to ‘cast a spell’ (Vaughan *Soldier* 202). In *Here Are Lovers* folkloric belief traditions are figured in the ‘wishing chair’ (Vaughan, *Here* 64), a ‘throne-like slab of rock’ (Wallace, ‘Introduction’ xiv) which overlooks the local river. The slab is believed to be a portal to Annwn as ‘’Tis like a throne hewn out of rock by no human hand. ’Tis told by the old folks as whoever do sit in it and wish, telling their wish to none, shall have it come true’ (Vaughan, *Here* 65). Gronwy and Laetitia are ill-fated lovers who make a wish upon the throne and elope one night. They are never seen again. Here, in her earlier novels, Vaughan uses folkloric motifs and belief systems to suggest narrative themes. In later texts her interest in Welsh myth, fairy and folklore becomes more explicit as they are the focus of her narratives and underpin her interrogation of wider themes.

The following discussion focuses on Vaughan’s short fiction *A Thing of Nought* (1934) and her novels, *Harvest Home* (1936) and *Iron and Gold* (1948) and will discuss how she treats myth and fairy tale differently. *A Thing of Nought* and *Iron and Gold* are historical narratives set in an unspecified past, but the events of *Harvest Home* ‘take place about the year 1800’ (Newman 62). These three texts explicitly deal with supernatural Wales whilst entwining Gothic elements through their narratives. *Iron and Gold*, and *A Thing of Nought* are framed stories, with a contemporary narrator looking back to an idyllic youth in Wales. Honno republished *A Thing of Nought* in a collection of short stories *A*

*View Across the Valley* (1999), and *Iron and Gold* (2002) in their Welsh Women's Classics series. Both publications are edited by Jane Aaron and demonstrate the continued recovery of Welsh women's writing, particularly in the era of devolved Welsh government, at a time when Welsh identities of gender and nationhood are re-constructed for the new millennium. Such a series anticipates Seren's recent commissioned re-tellings of *The Mabinogion*, which appeared in 2009.

*A Thing of Nought* is 'representative of [Vaughan's] fiction in the symbolic prominence of its Welsh rural setting, and its concern with familial relationships, gender and religion' (Gramich, *Twentieth* 63). It also establishes her thematic engagement with Welsh Annwn, whereby the folklore of changeling children is central to the narrative, and to Vaughan's interrogations of power between a young woman, Megan Lloyd, and her ultra-conservative, Nonconformist minister husband, Rees Lloyd. Welsh folklore is treated as a recuperative power which allows Megan Lloyd to germinate a child of her dreams. Through an act of Immaculate Conception she births a child she should have borne by her true love, Penry Price. Significantly, Vaughan recuperates the source tale of changeling children which figure such infants as monstrosities, by positing Megan's changeling child as a *beau ideal*, representing the outcome of a perfect love between a man and a woman. Furthermore, Welsh folkloric intertexts here allow Vaughan to imply a burgeoning feminism in the meek housewife Megan. Her husband can control every material element of her life, apart from her inner life, and her reproductive energies. Her imagination is analogous with her fertility. At the story's conclusion Rees's suspicions of her infidelity are allayed and he worships her thereafter.

In *Harvest Home*, Vaughan engages directly with Welsh myth, specifically that of the Blodeuwedd tale in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*. In this novel, Vaughan treats Welsh myth as a medium of hegemonic discourse, similar in function to that of Classical myth tales. Daniel Hafod, patriarch of a respected and commercially successful farm, lusts after Eiluned the dairy-maid who is betrothed to Daniel's cousin, Dan. Daniel Hafod is a violent misogynist and explicitly draws upon *The Mabinogi* to impose his lust on another of his dairy-maids. He rapes the young woman after calling on his paternal birth-right to myth-make women as subjected vassals and silent Muses. Vaughan uncovers the violent misogyny at the heart of the Fourth Branch and aligns it with its equally damaging Classical counterparts. However, there is a complexity in her treatment of Welsh myth whereby on the one hand she is uncovering the Welsh source to present it to a readership, instead of drawing on Classical myth (for example, Zeus's rape of Leda), but then she is critiquing the power structures within it. Daniel Hafod commits suicide at the narrative's conclusion during which he does recant his atrocious behaviour, but the damage has been done. Vaughan leaves no doubt as to the damaging influence, on both men and women, of unmitigated use of Welsh myth.

In *Iron and Gold*, Vaughan returns to Welsh fairylore to explore consequences for couples who do not work to maintain that initial flush of first love and respect throughout their married lives. Within her text, Vaughan places her moralistic focus on Owain who entices a fairy woman from her underwater lake home to be his mortal wife. Glythin loves Owain and so acquiesces to his every whim, including setting aside her supernatural powers. Although at first he



delights in her otherness, she is gradually socialised by Welsh customs so that she is not entirely fairy and not entirely human. Owain breaks the conditions of their marriage agreements: he is not to strike Glythin three times with iron (he does), and he is not to be unfaithful (he is). Consequently, Glythin leaves Owain and returns to her lake as a fairy. Distraught at his loss, he follows her and is supposed dead as he is never seen again.

Here, Vaughan develops themes present in her earlier texts. There is an autocratic husband, in a similar mode to Rees Lloyd, who keenly feels the weight of Welsh social traditions and wishes that his wife would conform to them. Reminiscent of Daniel Hafod, Owain actively engages with Welsh supernaturalism for self-serving purposes. Although Owain disrespects Annwn he is, like Rees and Daniel Hafod, recuperated by it. He learns to be a better human being because of his contact with Annwn as he repents of his ignorant and cruel treatment of Glythin.

Vaughan suggests that if Welsh myth is used for fascist and misogynist purposes (she uncovers the potential in the tales for this usage) then destructive outcomes of murder, hysteria and rape are very possible, in myth used by hegemonies to justify those behaviours, on an individual level, and collectively. For Vaughan, Welsh folklore is more recuperative than myth and seeks to empower women to withstand misogyny in all of its forms, and it also seeks to establish parity between the sexes, especially within the domestic sphere.

Katie Gramich suggests 'that generally [Welsh] female contemporaries of Vaughan tended to eschew the mythical in favour of the realistic' (*Twentieth* 66), but like other contemporaneous writers of the early twentieth century, such as

Virginia Woolf (L. Thomas 29), H.D, Dorothy Edwards and Margiad Evans, Hilda Vaughan engages with myth and folkloric narratives in order to conduct ‘social and cultural critiques’ (Wilson 4). Vaughan, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, draws upon Welsh fairy and folk tales in ways similar to those engaging with fairy tales under the influence of Modernism, second-wave feminism and in the closing decades of the century. Publishing fifty years earlier than second-wave feminism, Vaughan uses fairy and folk narratives ‘to bring about peace and understanding, not domination’ (Zipes, *Don’t Bet* 18). Additionally, like her peers who also work with myth and folk traditions, Vaughan, as a writer of feminist metafiction (that is metamyth and metafolktale) reveals the ‘conventionality of the codes of fiction, how they have been constructed and how they can be changed’ (Greene qtd. in Wilson 4). Her treatment of myth presents an exploration of gender roles through uncovering and critiquing the ways in which specific myths create and endorse such roles.

Through using specifically Welsh source material, Vaughan also interrogates the authority of myth canon formation where ‘Classical myth is [...] authoritative and high in itself’ (Purkiss 441). Vaughan draws upon *The Mabinogi* to suggest something similar for Welsh heritage where Welsh myth is a repository of Welsh cultural capital. Such a suggestion, however, includes a caveat where she questions the revering of a myth tradition, or elements of that tradition, which endorse destructive relationships between men and women. Vaughan draws upon Welsh myth tales in order to question the validity of all myths as gatekeepers of patriarchal designated morality, a morality based upon ‘misogynies [and] violence’ (Sellers 8). Jeni Williams asserts that Hilda Vaughan’s writing

demonstrates how ‘gender is hidden and implicated in the construction of nation’ (‘Intertexts’ 166) and I suggest that she uses myth and folk tales in different ways to present such implications of gender and nationhood.

A thematic concern with remaining open to seeing beauty in difference and otherness also becomes a way of exploring mythic nationalist discourses. Defining and then excluding what is considered taboo by the ruling elite is central to the nation-building endeavour with myth narrative being central to this project (Schöpflin 19). Otherness, defined by taboos of gender or foreignness, induces fear and hatred in the status quo: Vaughan interrogates how difference defined by foreignness must also be met with continual respect and acceptance. Jeni Williams notes the socio-historic context of Vaughan’s writing (‘Intertexts’ 166); Vaughan was publishing throughout the 1930s, and as an evacuee to the U.S.A. during the Second World War, at the apex of European fascism. Vaughan, like her contemporary H.D., associates patriarchal myth making with violence, oppression and the silencing of those deemed other by an androcentric ruling centre.

Susan Friedman notes that ‘parallel to, but years before the contemporary woman’s movement, H.D. [links] the masculine mystique with hierarchical terror-based, death-centred social systems’ (173) and I argue that Vaughan is similarly engaged. At a time when phallogentric fascist European governments were engaged in war, Vaughan interrogates the consequences of destructive dominant myth narratives which reject otherness in order to define a national identity and justify, to some extent, war and genocide. Vaughan demonstrates the dangers of basing a nation’s identity on exclusionary practices, practices symbolised through myth narratives which endorse fear and hatred of otherness.

Accepting what is foreign is also figured within Vaughan's reworking of Welsh folklore. Drawing on the Welsh Fairy Bride legend as a folkloric intertext in *Iron and Gold*, she deploys the folktale motif of the Calumniated Wife (Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife' 26) in which an incomer wife is persecuted after her marriage to an indigenous man. Not only must Owain strive to maintain reverence for Glythin's strange beauty as a woman but also as a foreigner – in this case as a water-dwelling fairy made mortal through her marriage. Owain understands that he can 'bring back [Glythin's] beauty by cherishing it again' (Vaughan, *Iron* 194) and says, "'Tis I must cure my late blindness, if by striving it can be cured' (Vaughan, *Iron* 198). In *Iron and Gold* Vaughan uses Welsh folklore to explore how fear and hatred of otherness, defined by gender or race, or both, can be overcome. According to her presentations of Welsh matriarchal folktale traditions equality between genders and racial groups can be established, and where equality fails, reconciliation is always possible if both sides are able to re-vision what is 'strange as beautiful' (Aaron, 'Foreword' xi) in the other. Vaughan's texts demonstrate a subversion of the veneration afforded to myth narratives as well as the misogyny imbedded within them. Therefore, Vaughan offers a complex engagement with both Welsh myth and Welsh märchen, and it is to her engagement with märchen that the present discussion now turns.

### *A Thing of Nought* (1934)

*A Thing of Nought* presents Vaughan's thematic concern with maintaining respect and equality throughout a long marriage, with folkloric intertexts drawing out

such concerns. Jane Aaron has noted the ‘clash of spiritual and emotional values between husband and wife’ (‘Introduction’ ix) in *A Thing of Nought*, a clash which is eventually overcome.

Set in the remote Welsh valley of Cwmbach, Vaughan’s short story, *A Thing of Nought*, tells of Megan, a young woman who finds her true love and soul mate in Penry Price. Penry emigrates to Australia to prepare a life for them there, but he is absent many years and Megan fears him dead. In Penry’s absence, with no other option, she marries Rees Lloyd, a Nonconformist preacher. Penry does eventually return from Australia but Megan ‘had married Rees Lloyd, and was bound’ (Vaughan, *A Thing* 154). Soon after her refusal to leave Rees, Penry moves to a neighbouring valley and Megan discovers she is pregnant with her first child, Ifor. This child, it seems, is a changeling, formed by Megan’s love for Penry as they never consummated their love. Here, Vaughan draws on a common plot in nineteenth-century writing, such as that in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) and Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden* (1862) in which women marry for convenience, believing that their true love has died, when in fact they have not. Vaughan amends this plot through her addition of the changeling child and by having the child resemble the absent lover.

When Megan is accused of adultery, and bullied by her suspicious husband, she denies the charge and accounts for baby Ifor’s appearance, stating: ‘‘Tis the child of my dreams’ (Vaughan, *A Thing* 163). Rees eventually believes her to be innocent of cuckolding him after he follows Megan to Penry’s deathbed. Hiding outside, he overhears Megan and Penry discussing their miracle child and lamenting their lost love. Thereafter, Rees strives every day to elicit her

forgiveness which he attains, eventually. Megan outlives him for many years, caring for her children and grandchildren.

Megan's changeling pregnancy entwines two forms of supernatural birth-giving: Welsh folkloric *plentyn-newid* (changed child or changeling), and Christian Immaculate Conception. Vaughan describes the child's gestation as a conscious act where Megan continually thought of

the child she might have borne, had she been the wife of Penry – blue-eyed and golden haired, splendid to look upon, like himself [...] She had set herself, scarcely conscious of what she was doing, to form the child of her dreams. Throughout her waking hours she dwelt on the memory of Penry. [...] Her picture gallery of beloved memories grew more vivid as her time drew near. (Vaughan, *A Thing* 159)

Megan has experienced a form of Immaculate Conception, likened by the frame story's narrator to that of Saint Anne (mother of the Virgin Mary); she has conceived a child with her dark-featured husband Rees, but the appearance of the child has been entirely influenced by her loving thoughts for the blonde Penry Price. After nine months 'the child that was born [...] was blue-eyed and had a crop of close yellow curls all over his head. When Megan's mother took the crumpled scrap of flesh out of the doctor's hands, she stared at him with grave misgiving' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 160). Little Ifor, the changeling child, causes suspicions as to his origins so that 'the matrons who went to see Megan's baby whispered about it as they came out of chapel' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 161).

Traditional belief in the existence of *plentyn-newid* would normally explain such an appearance, and would provide a family (or a mother) with a rationale to

justify such a child. Vaughan's affirmation of the Welsh plentyn-newid folklore is particularly interesting when sources for changeling children are considered.

Sikes recounts how the Tylwyth Teg 'have a fatal admiration for lovely children' (56) and so will seek an opportunity to take a human child and leave a changeling, a plentyn-newid, in its place. 'The plentyn-newid has the exact appearance of the stolen infant, at first; but its aspect speedily alters. It grows ugly of face, shrivelled of form, ill-tempered, wailing, and generally frightful. It bites and strikes, and becomes a terror to the poor mother' (Sikes 56). C.F. Goodey and Tim Stainton suggest that in eras pre-dating medical science a belief in changeling children would explain children conceived out of wedlock, birth defects and sudden infant death, or the sudden sickening of a child (223). Such a belief, for example, could provide a potent rationale for a mother perplexed by a child who had become shrivelled of form, ill-tempered and frightful overnight (due to a fever or bacterial infection). Sikes, and Goodey and Stainton, recount how parents of changelings would follow traditional revelatory rituals which sought to banish the changeling.

These rituals were often akin to witchcraft trials and were just as deadly as they involved torture and neglect of children, leading to eventual infanticide (Sikes 57). A case of a changeling ritual was recorded in Caernarvonshire in 1857, just twenty years before Sikes published his anthropological study of Welsh folklore (1880). Goodey and Stainton trace changeling superstition through Catholicism back to the fourth century *Vulgate Bible* (226) and argue that changeling beliefs can be mapped to modern psychology through a "coping" or "acceptance" theory, based on a bereavement model [where parents] mourn the

loss of the child they expected but have not had' (Goodey and Stainton 224).

Changelings, then, are traditionally negative creatures depicted as 'a mere mass of flesh without a soul' (Goodey and Stainton 225).

Furthermore, Goodey and Stainton argue that 'women have always behaved in as lethally Darwinian a manner towards [changeling] children as men' (239). On the contrary, however, Vaughan's positive reclamation of changelings is underscored by Megan's love for the child, love which is manifest by her sitting 'for hours in silent adoration of the child on her lap' (*A Thing* 161). Through drawing on iconic imagery of the Virgin Mary sitting with a swaddled baby Jesus, Vaughan demonstrates an affirmatory engagement with changelings. This is further emphasised through the naming of the child 'Ifor' which means 'Lord' in English. Engaging with the changeling folklore in this positive way recuperates the source tale to figure the changeling, Ifor, as a cherubim and a Christ-like child with whom Megan is besotted. Not only does she construct a narrative which draws upon folklore to recuperate relationships between the genders, but she recuperates the source tradition as well.

As has been indicated in the above discussion, Vaughan entwines Welsh folklore and Christian miracle narrative within her texts. Such entwining is complex. Megan's association with water, another Christian symbol, is obliquely referenced from the opening lines of the novella: the narrator declares in the second sentence of the story, 'In my memory she lives as Saint Anne' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 132). Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, herself conceived her daughter through Immaculate Conception and is the patron of women in child birth, pregnancy and issues surrounding fertility / infertility. Her patronage of



female fertility means that she is worshipped for creating life where there is barrenness and is therefore associated with the Celtic Cauldron of Rebirth as a pseudo-womb (Walker 39). Such a cauldron is symbolic of sacred lake folktales and therefore of the Lady of the Lake narratives which include powerful fairy women as lake dwellers (Walker 151). I suggest that Glythin in Vaughan's *Iron and Gold*, and Megan originate from similar folkloric motifs.

Vaughan critiques Christian myth as she weaves it into her Welsh folklore narrative. This underscores how Christian epistemology assimilates local customs into its repertoire of sanctified miracles whereby the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception of Christ, and Saint Anne's immaculate conception of Mary, could be read as variants of the changeling child folklore motif. The difference between the two variants is one of authority. Church scripture makes Mary's Virgin birth an official event in its repertoire whereas there is no room for Welsh folkloric narratives of similar occurrences. Similarly, Saint Anne as the virgin mother of Mary, was deposed by Church elders after the fifteenth century when the account of her immaculate conception of Mary was 'one virgin birth too many' (Walker 40). Megan (signifying a Welsh folkloric tradition) and Saint Anne (as a paradoxical Christian matriarch) are both powerful women within their own narratives and yet those narratives have been effaced, absorbed or neglected by dominant homogenous discourses. Within *A Thing of Nought* and *Iron and Gold*, Vaughan uncovers such effaced folkloric narratives and proffers them as consolatory alternatives to the destructive dogmas of patriarchal myth.

In *A Thing of Nought*, when Megan is proved innocent, Rees achieves a sense of enlightenment. He comprehends that to engage with his wife he must

accept that he occupies little space in her heart and mind. It is an acceptance that has no joyful resolution as he now is tormented by questioning the Nonconformist religion that he has internalised and imposed upon others. Patriarchal religion has failed him as from the moment he learns of Megan's innocence '[d]oubts of all sorts came thronging up from this abyss, doubts as to the finality of his theological creed, the justice of his denunciations, the infallibility of the Bible' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 167). His reverence is switched to worshipping his wife and although he 'became daily more morose and absorbed in uncertainty' he considers her a worker of true miracles and 'ceased to regard [her] as his possession' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 168, 168). He now possesses an understanding of humanity and spirituality that is not possible within misogynist/androcentric religion. It is in this state of enlightened uncertainty that Megan comes to accept *him*. Megan says of Rees after his death 'I was understandin' him, at the last [...] And what you do understand you do forgive' (Vaughan, *A Thing* 169). However, in her textual engagement with *The Mabinogi*, Vaughan suggests that this acceptance of a woman's selfhood and parity between husband and wife is not possible through myth traditions. It is towards this engagement that the discussion now turns.

### *Harvest Home* (1936)

Within *Harvest Home*, Hilda Vaughan uncovers the violent misogyny at the heart of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* and aligns it with its equally damaging Classical counterparts. For Vaughan, androcentric myth destabilises and makes untenable constructive relationships between men and women, as such myths are

based upon discourses of domination and subjugation; they seek ‘to establish the sole way of ordering the world’ (Schöpflin 19).

In this ‘melodramatic’ narrative (Knight 43), *Harvest Home* presents Daniel Hafod, a young man who has recently inherited Great House from his benefactor uncle; it is a successful farm and his childhood home. He is Master of Great House and its servants, but he really only desires dominion over one specific servant, Eiluned. Shortly after returning to Great House and taking up his responsibilities his cousin Dan arrives whilst on leave from the merchant navy. Daniel learns that Dan and Eiluned have begun a courtship, thus posing a barrier to his own plans to woo Eiluned. Soon his attraction to Eiluned the dairy maid ‘grow[s] monstrously into an obsession, which is the mainspring of the story’ (Newman 62). Dan returns to the seas in hope of securing his own captaincy so that he and Eiluned can marry and start a prosperous family life. Daniel strives to thwart Dan and Eiluned’s plans, by bullying Eiluned and even murdering dozens of men by wrecking a ship on which he thought Dan was aboard (and for which another man is found guilty and is hanged). Daniel Hafod begins his life as Master of the Great House, but through his obsession with Eiluned he becomes a psychotic mass-murderer who finally kills himself in a hallucinogenic psychological breakdown. Dan returns from his latest voyage, marries Eiluned and as Daniel’s cousin and only relative, inherits Great House. The cyclical structure of the narrative ends as it begins, with a Dan/Daniel Hafod standing at the gates of Great House as its new Master.

From the outset issues of property and ownership underpin Vaughan’s explorations of Welsh myth and Otherness. In *Harvest Home* Daniel regards the

women in his employ as property, inherited along with the cattle, sheep and acreage of his uncle's farm. As a patriarch he possesses dominion over Welsh nature, society and culture symbolised in his immediate plans to 'erase his uncle's Christian name and substitute his own' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 12) on the farm wagons he passes in his newly inherited fields. Daniel's standing as Master is soon tinged, however, destroying any good intentions he once held.

Christopher Newman notes that Daniel is 'presented as aspects of a patriarchal society in dissolution' (23). Daniel's psychological struggle is symptomatic of patriarchal dissolution played out on the site of its myth-making of women who refuse to be myth-made. His rights to ownership of livestock and arable land do not include the woman he desires: Eiluned, despite being a servant, is not his property. Daniel is ill prepared to interact with a strong-willed woman who refuses patriarchy's mythic models of feminine subservience. Daniel appreciates public demonstrations of such subservience: when he arrives at Great House as its new master he takes pleasure in watching as three maidservants curtsy to him (Vaughan, *Harvest* 14). His high status as a yeoman landowner ratifies his role of patriarch as he becomes overseer of economic, legal, educational, social and cultural contexts in the Abercoran locality.

Through Daniel, Vaughan demonstrates how a man may become a victim of restrictive gender roles just as much as women. In *Harvest Home*, the imposition of such strictures is traced to Dame Hafod, Daniel's mother, who inculcates his sense of male entitlement. She conditions her son from a young age to expect to inherit the family farm. Dame Hafod is a determined woman, just like Owain's mother in *Iron and Gold*, who judges the worth of her fairy daughter-in-

law according to the wealth she brings as a dowry. She tells Owain: ‘‘There’s [...] money to be caught from courting one o’ the Fair tribe’’ (sic) (Vaughan, *Iron* 44). In *Harvest Home*, when Daniel arrives at his newly acquired farm he meets his mother: ‘She held up her head and they smiled into each other’s faces with the secret pride of conspirators whose work has been achieved’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 14). Through his mother’s earnest conditioning, Daniel’s predestined ascendancy through the hierarchical ranks of the patriarchal system means that he cannot be anything other than a patriarch. Consequently he is unable to interact with Eiluned, an autonomous woman, in any meaningful way.

Daniel imposes silence on Eiluned by creating her sexually within his fantasies, a fantasy that he later enacts with Lizzie, another of his servants. He covets Eiluned’s silent body which is only allowed to articulate a sexual response. Watching her in the farmyard he imagines a pseudo-rape fantasy: ‘He pictured her with head thrown back, hair loosened, lips parted, the white bosom exposed beneath his dragging hands. [She] would cry out and struggle; but he would hold her fast and kiss her into silence’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 54). He does not desire her individual personality that is naturally articulated through speech, for which his cousin Dan loves her.

In Eiluned’s consistent refusal of his advances, Daniel’s logic is shaken by the silence she imposes upon him and not the silence that he imposes upon her, a silence that he feels is his right as a man, to impose upon a woman. Jane Caputi asserts that the questioning of the solidity of psychic boundaries is a central agenda for ‘feminist myth-makers [who] actively reinterpret ancient myth, focussing attention on female divinities, supernaturals and powers that have been

repressed and silenced' (425 – 426). Such an imposition of silence becomes integral to Daniel's rightful male control over Eiluned and of his allegedly rightful male myth-making of her, rights that he exercises over the housemaid, Lizzie, when he creates her in the image of Eiluned /Blodeuwedd. In the sexual role-play scene where he assumes the role of *The Mabinogi's* Gwydion, he rapes Lizzie, he echoes his exultation at finally owning Great House, "'You are mine," he whispered, and kept on repeating, "Mine! At last! I have *made* you!" His eyes were shut; his face drawn and colourless, as that of a man exhausted by great effort' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 143). Issues of property, ownership and myth-making of women by men, as a controlling medium, are entwined and amplified here, resulting in and justifying the rape of a woman.

Daniel Hafod's myth-making is linked to *The Mabinogi* and represents how Vaughan's work interrogates elements of the Welsh myth canon by analysing the function and the beneficiaries of myth-making. For this reason, the discussion focuses on the scene in which Daniel harnesses the creative energies of the magicians of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, Gwydion and Math, to conjure his ideal woman. This exclusive privilege that allows Welsh men to create is found in the oldest of Welsh cultural records; that of *The Mabinogi*, which has origins dating back to the sixth century (S. Davies xix).

Within the source tale (S. Davies 47 – 64), Lleu Llaw Gyffes is cursed by his mother, Aranrhod, to the effect that he will never have a name, bear arms or be married to a human woman. After a series of deceptions in which Aranrhod is tricked into lifting the first two curses, Lleu's uncles, Gwydion and Mathonwy (Lord of Gwynedd), who are powerful magicians, use natural magic to conjure a

woman from flowers of oak, meadowsweet and broom. They name her Blodeuedd. She is given to Lleu as a gift and they are married. Blodeuedd commits adultery and in a pact to escape with her lover, Gronw Pebyr, she seduces Lleu into confessing how he may die (in keeping with hero-lore he is vulnerable to specific and unique threats which are usually known only to the hero). Telling Gronw how Lleu may be killed, Blodeuedd arranges for his murder: being a demigod Lleu survives the attack. Gwydion punishes Blodeuedd by turning her into an owl, thereafter to be called Blodeuwedd; in that form, as a creature of the night, she will be shunned by the animal and human worlds for all eternity. Gronw must suffer a similar blow as to that one he dealt to Lleu. Gronw is not a demi-god and so is killed by Lleu's spear.

Daniel Hafod impersonates the Welsh sorcerer Gwydion, a character within the Welsh source tale who is misogyny personified. Daniel thus justifies the ensuing rape of his housemaid Lizzie by rationalising his behaviour as a Welsh male's birth-right. Impersonating Gwydion, or drawing mythic power from his ancestor, Daniel tells Lizzie, “‘Do not cry; for ’tis the sacrifice to love each maid must make . . . . ’Tis *I* – that prize you more than life, must be the first – the only one – to take you. . . . Honey sweet! ’Tis only *I* will plunder your dear treasure’” (Vaughan, *Harvest* 140).

When Daniel is seducing his housemaid Lizzie, he actively recreates her in the image of Eiluned, the object of his sexual obsession. Daniel notes Lizzie's dark curly hair and wishes ‘it had been spun silk. She was swarthy of skin; but he began to fancy her turned white as milk’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 140). He laments, ‘If only I could transform her into my dear!’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 140). Informed by

the imagery of Math and Gwydion creating Blodeuwedd in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, the scene is a culmination of his belief in his ability and his authority to myth-make women. Vaughan's narrator attributes Daniel's vision to 'the magic power of self-delusion' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 144). Daniel creatively imagines Eiluned / Lizzie as a sexual conquest and so he valorises her as a silent virginal goddess. His perception of her makes her a figure of worship where she is symbolic of his power to myth-make. "“You are mine,” he whispered, and kept on repeating, “Mine! At last! I have *made* you!”” (Vaughan, *Harvest* 143). Daniel longs to possess Eiluned and control her, to submit her to his will and his sexual authority, as he does Lizzie, and metaphorically Eiluned *through* imagining her proximity instead of Lizzie's. When Lizzie implores him to repeat the kind words he uttered to her during their sexual encounter he retorts, 'They were not said to *you*' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 145). In his musing upon the ability to myth-make Lizzie into Eiluned, he declares that he 'was able to make the charm work...But [he] cannot make it endure' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 145).

Daniel utilises the magical powers of *The Mabinogi* and therefore makes clear how women are subjected by patriarchal myth-making. It can be argued that Hilda Vaughan, in this instance, is not rewriting the individual myth of the Fourth Branch by engaging with the character of Blodeuwedd and/or her creators. The emphasis is placed on the male's power to create, on his authority not only to narrate a being into existence via story-telling but also to use his exclusive access to ancient rites. These allow men to manipulate women, or in Daniel's case, specific women, Eiluned and Lizzie. It can also be argued here that Vaughan is implicitly commenting on Welsh culture as the authority of Welsh male myth-



making is questioned. Daniel appeals to an elder of his ancient culture to assist in his mesmerism and manipulation of Lizzie, as he recalls that Gwyddion (sic) the magician ‘was able to take what he did not want and change it into his heart’s desire’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 141). By interweaving the source tale within her text, the metamyth exemplifies how patriarchs draw upon misogynies embedded within the myths to control women, with the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* being no different from the *Iliad*, in this respect.

This intertextual use of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* indicates how Vaughan elevates the neglected Welsh tradition so as to interrogate its endorsing of gender roles, but not only does she draw parallels with the function of Classical myth she also implicitly critiques wider Judeo-Christian religious myth. By having a man create a woman, or a man usurp the birthing abilities of a woman, Vaughan draws upon the myth of Eve being created from Adam’s rib to explore how patriarchal religious myth is complicit in dictating gender roles within its dogmas. These dogmas teach that a woman’s ability to bear and birth children is not unique to their gender as men have fulfilled such a function too. Therefore, in exploring religion’s echoing of Classical myth with regard to subjection of the female, Vaughan exposes how elements of Welsh myths are also analogous with Judeo-Christian religious myths.

Barbara G. Walker includes a significant anthropological exposition of ‘Birth-Giving Males’ (106 – 109) in her *Encyclopedia of Women’s Myths and Secrets* (1983). Walker argues that:

Since birth-giving was the only true mark of divinity in primitive belief, the first gods to claim any sort of supremacy had also to claim the ability

to give birth. In fact, usurpation of the feminine power of birth-giving seems to be the distinguishing mark of the earliest gods. (106)

According to Walker the palimpsest of religious mythology in which traditions overlap, and through which misogynist dogma in Christian theology and theocracy can be charted, has meant that Adam has replaced Eve as birth-giver (107). For church writers desperate to authorise male supremacy, Eve became a death-giver, being responsible for the 'Fall' of Mankind. This biblical narrative accords with the 'church fathers' fear and hatred of women, which expanded into a sexist attitude that permeated all of western society: Woman was identified with Death' (Walker 290). This is reflected in Classical myth through Cronus and Rhea or Zeus and Hera, where male progenitors are at the core of Classical myth narratives. This also finds a parallel with Welsh myth where Gwydion and Math, the male magicians, birth a female, Blodeuwedd, who then becomes a death-giver. In *Harvest Home*, Vaughan interrogates imposed gender roles and discourses which underpin the allocation of each gender's function. Vaughan draws on Welsh mythic narratives to expose how the imposition of strict gender roles damages both men and women, whilst uncovering how Welsh traditions are part of wider misogynist traditions – in this instance, Classical and Judeo-Christian mythologies.

The powerful scene in which Daniel mesmerises Lizzie, demonstrates how Vaughan exposes male usurpation of women's birth-giving divinity within the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*. Such an uncovering suggests that, within *Harvest Home*, Welsh myth tales are reclaimed and elevated to share similar status with their Classical and Judeo-Christian counterparts before being

interrogated to reveal comparable encoded phallogentric dicta. Ultimately such arrogation of female divinity is rendered destructive as Daniel cannot align rigid myth codes of conformity with lived experience. This suggests that for Vaughan, the phallogentric mythic modes are dangerous and that a reinstatement of matriarchal myth traditions and religions may engender a more affirmative status quo. This is signalled through Dan the Sailor inheriting the farm. On approaching Great House he is called Dan Hafod for the first time (Vaughan, *Harvest* 287), thus flagging up his lineage, but he is humbled by his new responsibilities. He says: ‘I will try to do you no dishonour, you wise old house’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 288). Being more respectful of women, Dan’s stewardship of the Great House will be based on humility and equality which suggests that the reinstatement of an affirmative status quo is possible after all.

Throughout *Harvest Home* Vaughan explores the failure of all phallogentric myths, including classical, Judeo-Christian and Welsh myths, to reconcile their idealised dictates with lived reality. Their failure is symbolic of ‘patriarchy in dissolution’ (Newman 23) and is figured in Daniel’s psychological dissolution at Eiluned’s continual refutation of his dominion over her. When Daniel is spying upon Eiluned as she enjoys a walk with her suitor Dan, ‘[a] hopeless anguish seized [Daniel], tearing his vitals, and he groaned aloud, and heard with pity and surprise the voice of his own suffering’ (Vaughan, *Harvest* 110). His psychic dissonance is manifest in the progression of his obsession with Eiluned’s refusals and his own awareness of slipping into insanity. He says, “‘I am gone mad [...] letting this thing get holt on me’” (Vaughan, *Harvest* 68). Newman points out that Vaughan is ‘disconcertingly accurate when she depicts

men tortured by lust' which he then goes on to describe as 'longing' (63).

Daniel's insanity escalates to the extremity of self harm and suicide although Vaughan indicates hope for Daniel's enlightenment: when in freefall from the cliff he considers how "It has all been a mistake [...] God receive me back, and let me start afresh." It was forgotten, and the waves washed over him gently' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 286). It is now Dan's turn to reinstate a more gynocentric myth model, one which may prove a more affirmative rote to live by.

Daniel's redemption, combined with the cyclical structure of the narrative, suggests that he and his cousin Dan are part of a wider theme which charts a macrocosmic evolution of gender relations. I would suggest that the doubled Dan/Daniel are bound in a birth, death, re-birth cycle of reincarnation, predetermined to live out the same narrative again and again, until they get it right. Daniel and Dan are doubled throughout *Harvest Home*, where the cousins are presented as literary doppelgängers. Andrew J. Webber, in his analysis of the doppelgänger in German literature, explores the literary theory of dualism, of literary representations of the divided self, where the doppelgänger 'echoes, reiterates, distorts, parodies, dictates, [and] impedes' (3) unified subjectivity. He surmises that the function of the doppelgänger is bound up with

return and repetition. The Doppelgänger returns compulsively both within its host texts and intertextually from one to the other. Its performances repeat both its host subject and its own previous appearances. It therefore plays a constitutive role in the structuring of its texts, by doubling them back on themselves. This function of return [can] be read as 'unheimlich' – uncanny – in the Freudian sense. (Webber 4)

When revealing that Dan has inherited the Great House, Vaughan not only echoes Daniel's approach to the farmstead but in some instances provides identical descriptions thus demonstrating a doubling back of character and plot.

As Daniel arrives at Great House after his uncle's death, its creaky front door opens where 'three maidservants had come to the threshold to await his pleasure, and his eye dwelt upon them. With demure smiles of welcome they curtsied low to the master' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 14). When Dan arrives after Daniel's death the front door creaks on rusty hinges where, 'three maid-servants [sic], whose faces he knew not, were come to the threshold. With smiles of welcome they curtsied low to the master' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 288). Whether or not it is but a publisher's typing error can only be guessed at, yet it is important to note the hyphenated 'maid-servants' who open the door to Dan. There is a possibility here, then, of Dan separating women from property, something that Daniel has never been able to achieve, much to his own detriment. It may be possible for Dan to achieve enlightenment whereas Daniel has to start again, throwing himself off the cliff significantly named 'Devil's Brother' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 42).

Daniel's suicide is instigated by his descent into insanity; he disassociates from reality and imagines himself to be a supernatural being. Vaughan draws upon Welsh folklore as a touchstone for Daniel's madness as he tries to manipulate folkloric traditions to entrap Eiluned in marriage. Again, Vaughan positions Welsh folkloric traditions as positively gynocentric as Daniel, a destructive patriarch, is himself destroyed through tampering with forces which spring from folkloric supernaturalism. In a pivotal scene towards the end of the

narrative, Vaughan presents the Welsh tradition of attending a church at midnight on Nosclyngiaf (All Hallow's Eve). At this time, parishioners would apparently hear the voice of God speak. Local variants describe God calling out names of parishioners due to die, or who have died, or of predicted marriages (Sikes 56). Daniel had entreated Eiluned to marry him if, after attending Abercoran church, she hears a voice proclaim that Dan has died at sea. She reluctantly agrees to this condition. Daniel has plotted to trick her so that she hears his voice proclaiming Dan's death.

At the church, in an overtly Gothic mode, Daniel is hysterical, 'demented [in] exultant derision' exclaiming, 'Look! I can drive my nails into the palms o' my hands, yet suffer no harm. I am so light, I could fly through the air, as witches be said to do. The host o' demons be under me. Their slippery wings hold me up' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 276). At the allotted time, Daniel conceals himself in the church gallery as Eiluned waits for the supernatural report. Whilst she waits she decides that she cannot bear to marry Daniel, even if Dan has died and so she leaves before midnight. In a reversal of the nineteenth-century romance plot noted in the discussion of *A Thing of Nought*, Vaughan's Eiluned does anticipate the return of her absent fiancée, Dan, who does eventually come back to her – her instincts were correct thus proving that she was right to leave the church. At midnight, in his hiding place, Daniel experiences a psychological disruption; he hallucinates demonic voices proclaiming his own name, thus they foretell his death. His hysteria descends into torment as he perceives a 'multitude of gibing devils' (Vaughan, *Harvest* 283) who chase him to the cliff's edge from which he jumps.

Previously Daniel has been empowered through his manipulation of androcentric Welsh myth through enacting the role of Gwydion as he rapes Lizzie, but here he is punished for attempting to exploit Welsh folklore. As a man, he misuses folkloric supernaturalism which, for Vaughan, empowers women. In *A Thing of Nought*, Vaughan indicates her literary recuperation of Welsh folkloric traditions by suggesting their affinity for Welsh women's empowerment; they are almost a gynocentric power base. Such a recuperation is also signalled in *Harvest Home* as Eiluned refuses to participate in Daniel's manipulation of her, a contrivance that utterly annihilates him. In *Harvest Home*, Vaughan draws upon Welsh folklore and Welsh myth to critique the viability of both when they are used by men to subjugate women and also to justify that subjugation.

### *Iron and Gold (1942/1948)*

The Welsh fairy tale of 'The Fairy Bride of Llyn y Fan Fach' is reworked as Vaughan's novel *Iron and Gold* and in both the source fairy tale and Vaughan's retelling there can be found affirmative heterogeneity, acceptance of the other, and respect for women's self agency. The following discussion explores how Vaughan draws upon gynocentric folklore to demonstrate reconciliation between the genders and an acceptance of otherness. Such a consolatory resolution, made possible through folktale narrative, is only implied in her treatment of Welsh myth. In *Harvest Home* Dan the sailor may be successful in reconciling myth with reality, but the narrative ends with the beginning of his stewardship. In her

folkloric intertexts Vaughan's narratives do proceed along arcs of dissolution, resolution and reconciliation so that the reader is sure of Owain's and Rees's absolved enlightenment.

As a fairy from the Welsh water-tribe of the Tylwyth Teg,<sup>6</sup> *Iron and Gold*'s Glythin (a gloss of the Welsh 'gwlythin' meaning 'dewdrop'), leaves the domain of the fairies to join her mortal husband, Owain. She agrees to stay for as long as he remains respectful, mindful, and appreciative of her individuality. This is symbolised by the taboo against striking her with iron. Owain is faithful to his promise for many years but begins to take his fairy bride for granted and gradually loses respect for her. This precipitates his affair with a gypsy woman (Miriam) to whom he confides his secret: Glythin is a fairy and if he strikes her three times with iron she will leave him and return to immortality in her underwater home. Having struck her twice during their marriage, Owain is fearful of delivering the third strike (another factor justifying his emotional and physical distance from his wife), but Miriam, desperate to have Owain to herself, instigates the final touch of iron. Upon Glythin's departure, Owain tells their son: 'Home she has gone, my son. But not, I fear, to ours. [She has returned to] the silent place where I found her' (Vaughan 196). Owain follows her to her lake home and is lost in a storm, apparently joining her in her natural element.

In *Harvest Home*, Welsh myth is interrogated as a tool of patriarchy which seeks to subject both genders through imposed gender roles, by which women in particular are dominated and socially conditioned. Zipes argues that 'socially

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<sup>6</sup> Tylwyth Teg is translated as the Fair Folk or Fair Tribe. Fairies and supernatural beings are traditionally given affectionate or respectful names by humans so as not to offend the fairies and incur their wrath, for example, they are also called Bendith y Mamau / Mother's Blessing.



conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial' (*Don't Bet* 3). *Iron and Gold* and *A Thing of Nought*, however, feature Welsh fairy and folk tales in a more gynocentric manner. Welsh fairy and folk traditions are posited as a source of female empowerment whereby Glythin and Megan are attuned to the tradition's potential to engender female self-determination. Such traditions, within a Welsh context, are presented by Vaughan as affirmative in their function and form. They work to neutralise the negative influence of misogynist socio-cultural discourses. In this way Welsh myth is counter-posed to Welsh fairy and folk tradition.

For Hilda Vaughan, Welsh folk and fairy tales do not impose gender roles and do not influence interaction between the genders. It is society that imposes gender roles and dictates the ways in which the sexes may interact. Owain's mother, who represents traditional gender roles and who is complicit in the socialisation of Glythin from an autonomous fairy to a subservient woman, warns: 'there be danger in differing from others; and he who is climbing high, and alone, has the further to fall, should he slip' (Vaughan, *Iron* 15). The widow presents Glythin with a second name of Martha, her Biblical namesake being the dutiful housewife in biblical scripture (Vaughan, *Iron* 47). She dresses Glythin in clothes customary to a farmer's wife, telling Owain, 'She has become one o' us now, see?' (Vaughan, *Iron* 41). Owain, in his attempts to woo Glythin away from her fairy realm presents her with bread, signifying the domestic realm and the inherent responsibilities of providing warmth, comfort, sustenance for a planned family. Rejecting the bread and what it symbolises, Glythin 'laughed at it [...] pitied mortal women who must accept whatever men chose to offer. By no such

hunger as theirs was she enslaved' (Vaughan, *Iron* 22, 23). Vaughan engages with Welsh folk and fairy tales to promote mutually respectful and supportive relationships between Welsh men and women, relationships free from strictures of gender roles between Welsh men and women. Therefore, she posits the tales as more reflective of everyday relations between heterosexual couples than those of Welsh myth.

Owain understands that an autonomous woman such as Glythin will not respond favourably to promises of happiness that have been defined for her by men.

‘Tis arrogance that has punished me with her loss,’ he lamented, upbraiding himself for having believed that she would be easy to win. ‘Not thus is captured heart’s desire, oh fool! But with heart’s blood must any great prize be paid for.’ (Vaughan, *Iron* 23)

For both sexes, individualism is allowed and, indeed, encouraged, as is free-will and equality. The challenge comes in maintaining such a perspective for the longevity of the partnership. Owain does manage to regain his perspective but it costs an effort ‘so hard he tautened and shook’ (Vaughan, *Iron* 198). He is punished for having let his perfect vision of Glythin slip as he loses his mortality, his place in the corporeal world.

Glythin, as a woman who displays strong independence, and who demands acknowledgement from the man who loves her, is closely associated with water – the most obvious example of this being her name, a glossed version of ‘dewdrop’. This association reminds us of Megan Lloyd and I argue that such a link suggests that water, in varying forms, becomes symbolic of Glythin (and Megan’s) sense of female independence and power. Joan Smith draws attention to such symbolism

when she comments specifically upon witchcraft and women. Smith suggests that such association of women with water ‘trails a persistently religious and magical significance’ (43). Walker, however, asserts a more positive association between women and wells, stating that ‘springs, fountains, ponds, wells were always female symbols in archaic religions, often considered water-passages to the underground womb’ (1067).

Wells represent the water-womb of Mother Hel, attributed as the source of all the children on earth and the etymological source of the words ‘holy’ and ‘healing’ (Walker 1067). Additionally, certain holy wells are associated with re-attachment of dismembered bodies; Walker cites instances of women re-joining the limbs of dead lovers in wells at Hileva (Hel-Eve), Osiris, and Lourdes (1068). This association is not unknown in the Welsh tradition: the tale of ‘Winifred’s Well’ in North Wales is a popular saga of how a Welsh princess, Winifred, was beheaded by a would-be rapist. Where her head fell, a spring burst from the ground. Her uncle, Saint Beuno, used the water to join her head to her body and she lived thereafter in devotion to God (Herrad, *The Woman* 115). Similar tales relate to Cofen, a hermit woman associated with the healing waters of St. Goven, and to Eiliwedd, a woman beheaded for refusing her father’s choice of suitor – where her body fell a spring welled up (Herrad, *The Woman* 7, 67). Within these Welsh tales, women associated with water and holy wells are often sainted in recognition of the divine springs which appear at the point of their death/reanimation, often as means through which a Christian epistemology may sanction local customs, thus assimilating such customs into its repertoire of

sanctified miracles. Within *Iron and Gold*, Glythin's innate affinity with water is continuously echoed.

Vaughan's Glythin is able to influence nature's seasons by controlling their length and severity with her influence signified through her ability to commune with nature through water. When Owain was anxious that a particularly long and harsh winter would kill their livestock he confides his concerns to Glythin. He later sees Glythin, but is not sure if she is a human being or 'spectre [as she is] crouched in the dark beside a waterfall, now frozen and silent [and] she stared into the void with eyes as green as shadows cast in ice. [...] Next day, a thaw set in' (Vaughan, *Iron* 168, 170). Glythin, attuned to her husband's fears, uses her natural abilities and metaphysical connections with water and nature to influence the seasons. She is able to lessen the winter chills and so demonstrates a care analogous to her role as a farmer's wife, but manifests this care through her supernatural powers.

Glythin, a water dwelling fairy, is a member of the immortal Fair Tribe who reside in Llyn Y Fan Fach. The water represents the marginalised female within androcentric culture and it is from these depths that Glythin emerges; it is also where Owain must subsume himself if he is to marry Glythin. Glythin's connection with her element can be traced throughout the narrative as although she leaves her element to inhabit the human world, she never relinquishes her psychical or physical connection with water. 'Down the stony water-courses, only a trickle moistened the velvet moss, and she would lay her cheek to it, so that if [Owain] kissed her face, it tasted cool and wet' (Vaughan, *Iron* 66). This leitmotif of Glythin's water connection should serve as a reminder to Owain of his wife's

immutable selfhood, a constancy that he once would have died for. When they first met at her lake home, Glythin refuses his marriage offers: he then attempts to join Glythin in her watery home, even if it means death for him. He calmly wades into the lake water ‘that crept up to his heart. Her element, it should embrace him also. For if she would not come to him, he must go to her’ (Vaughan, *Iron* 28). The Welsh fairy tale thus neutralises the negative influence of misogynist socio-cultural discourses, which demand that a woman acquiesce to the male.

Glythin requires Owain to acknowledge and accept that she is an autonomous being, a requirement that Hilda Vaughan connotes through water motifs. Glythin warns him: “‘Since you have offered me yourself, I will stay with you until you drive me away’” (Vaughan, *Iron* 28). Ultimately, Owain fails to consistently accept Glythin as his equal; she fulfils her promise as he does not, that is, she stays until he drives her away and she returns to her element.

Jane Aaron notes in her ‘Foreword’ to the Honno Classic re-print of *Iron and Gold*, that Owain and Glythin’s marriage ‘becomes expressive of the virtual impossibility of preserving throughout life a disposition free from the desire to live by rote, and open to seeing what is strange and beautiful’ (xi) and yet Owain at the close is able to re-perceive Glythin as a beautiful water fairy. Owain, the poet dreamer of *Iron and Gold*, experiences complete psychological dissonance in the moment he entirely loses his creative faculties. These faculties are crucial to his being able to appreciate his fairy-wife for being ‘young, shy and strange’, for remembering ‘how lovely Glythin had been, the maiden in her lovely green robe, before she became a working farmer’s wife!’ (Vaughan, *Iron* 44, 173). On the loss of Owain’s imagination Vaughan has commented, ‘I used this legend as a symbol

of a poet's loss of his soul or inspiration' (letter to Rosemary Sutcliff). For Vaughan, then, a Welsh fairy tale facilitates an interrogation of equality between genders. She symbolises such equality through a couple's ability to continually revere their partner and express such reverence through acts of love and artistry. Owain's failure to consistently revere Glythin is reflected in his failure as a poet which he laments without recognising the correlation between them. Yearning to rekindle his youthful adventures through an extra-marital relationship, he says: 'For I was never fulfilling my early promise as a bard; and therefore, unsatisfied, I cannot abide to grow old' (Vaughan, *Iron*144). His affair with Miriam, a gipsy entertainer from a travelling fair, is the death knell for his imagination, his marriage and his own life.

Vaughan charts this dissolution as Owain becomes 'haunted [and] provok[ed] to cruelty [his eyes grow] hollow and his temper, week by week, more sour' (Vaughan, *Iron*159). In a scene in which Glythin is apparently in direct communication with nature and which reiterates her connection with water, Owain watches her from afar. His failure to perpetually respect her selfhood throughout their married life means that witnessing her communion with her element now fills him with dread.

Her hands were locked so fast that he saw their knuckles, skeleton sharp and white as snow. Her head was bowed and she stared into the void with eyes as green as shadows cast in ice. Within them it seemed that her tears had frozen [...]. Even her hair was colourless. "She is dead," he thought, "I dare not touch her. 'Tis useless to cry her name." And choking with dread, he turned away, not knowing what he had seen or whether for sure he had seen it. (Vaughan, *Iron* 169)

Glythin's physical and psychical link with natural Wales is symbolic of her intrinsic self-governance, but he is now afeared of it and of her. At the conclusion of the narrative, he follows her into the tempest:

he could not see, but he envisaged pale-green fangs tearing, and water monsters heaved up on end among a fume of spray and splinters [...]. 'Blind grief', he gasped, 'how certain sure you do tread in the track o' blind passion! The two shall drown together, which cannot be severed, no more nor sin and sorrow.' [...] When all his tears were spent, a worse fate than grief befell him. Chill to the heart as a corpse, he stared aghast at the demons which men cannot see who never saw an angel. All that is evil and ugly beset him in most foul shape. 'This is her last and most terrible gift to me,' he thought. (Vaughan, *Iron* 201)

His acceptance of Glythin's individual selfhood, echoed by the reinvigoration of his imagination, returns to him at the point of Glythin becoming lost to him, when he follows after her as she returns to her lake home. His imaginative faculties now sullied and compromised by patriarchal paradigms, present him with nightmarish and hellish visions as his abilities are not attuned to creating and maintaining a positive image of Glythin. He is able to re-perceive her as she once was but in order to successfully retain his bardic vision he must enter Annwn and join Glythin in her world, on her terms.

### Conclusion

In her discussion of women-centred myth-making, Diane Purkiss argues that:

the rewriting of myth cannot be limited to the rewriting of particular favoured or disliked figures. It can extend to complex engagements with the very place of myth in literature, the place of the woman writer in relation to those discourses, and the displacement of myth as a buried truth of culture. (445)

Hilda Vaughan is involved in the rewriting of myth whilst questioning the appropriation of the mythic literary canon by a male gendered system, thus refusing to validate males both as creators of myth and as controllers of the patriarchal system that is in turn underwritten by such man-made myth. In *A Thing of Nought*, and the novels *Harvest Home* and *Iron and Gold*, Vaughan utilises fairy tale and myth as an exploration of the function of individual myths, of myth discourse and ultimately the presentation of the male and female experience within myth and fairy tales.

Within *Harvest Home*, Vaughan first of all addresses the status of Welsh myth whereby it is recovered from the shadow of classical myth and is critiqued as sharing similar autocratic functions as the more revered classical counterparts. Vaughan engages with Welsh myth to uncover and restore/apply high status to it as a myth cycle and then seeks further to interrogate the Welsh myth tradition by exposing the ways in which the tradition is still a patriarchal conditioning tool, utilised to impose androcentric gender roles that uphold a patriarchal status quo. In this way Vaughan demonstrates a 'complex engagement' with myth as she does not provide a recuperative or sympathetic reworking of Welsh myth despite, initially, working to elevate its status to share similar standing as Classical myth. This, in fact, can be read as a strategy which ultimately leads to a critique of Welsh myth – or at least the misogyny which can be found at its centre. Vaughan works to prove the validity of the Welsh cycle before she can begin to untangle the androcentric discourses that underpin the cycle.

In *Harvest Home*, Daniel Hafod's worship of Eiluned is entrenched in reductive and possessive terms, terms that he has inherited and internalised. This



is also true of Owain and of Rees Lloyd. Vaughan is therefore ‘engaged in a revelation of the feminine, of that which has been derogated in patriarchal culture’ (Hanson, *Hysterical* 14). Commenting upon the repression of the female in marginalised cultures, Jeni Williams states: ‘it is more difficult for the women of subordinated groups whose voice is denied as part of the (phallic) homogeneity required in order to stabilise their minority cultural identity’ (‘Intertexts’ 152). The reclamation of myth by Vaughan does not present the women in the texts as attempting to vocalise their experience by integrating themselves into the phallic symbolic order via myth. It is the men who must reorder their male centred logic to integrate themselves into the marginalised feminine world – the men must acknowledge that the woman whom they love has an autonomous free-will despite existing within a patriarchal regime. The reordering of male logic and its acknowledgement of the feminine experience is a tool of Vaughan’s reclamation activities and her questioning of the power structures behind male myth-making, including the Welsh tradition.

Hilda Vaughan engages with Welsh folklore in a different way from her treatment of myth whereby folklore, being traditionally of a gynocentric origin, suggests a possibility of compromise. This is demonstrated throughout the folkloric intertexts of *A Thing of Nought* and *Iron and Gold*, but particularly at the narrative denouement whereby Glythin and Owain, Megan and Rees, achieve a sense of enlightened reconciliation. Jane Aaron in her ‘Introduction’ to *A View Across the Valley* says of Megan, ‘the subordinated wife in Hilda Vaughan’s *A Thing of Nought* succeeds in bringing about in her preacher husband, a reversal of his original centre of values’ (xvii). This is also true of Owain when his

imaginative faculties are directly attuned to his respect for Glythin as a self-governing person. His success in life, and his life itself, depends on him continually maintaining his respect for her.

Welsh fairy and folk tales such as those used intertextually in *Iron and Gold* and *A Thing of Nought*, however, are presented as a power base of female autonomy. Welsh fairy and folk tales are, according to Vaughan's usage, inherently gynocentric. Megan and Glythin's immutable sense of self is attributed to their affiliation with the everyday domestic supernatural, rather than the grander, Heroic supernatural of myth traditions. Such women draw their resilience from their affiliation with Welsh fairy and folk traditions – from the supernatural of the everyday kind, such as that to be found in the seemingly 'ordinary' lakes of mid-Wales and the everyday miracle of a woman conceiving a child that personifies true love. For Vaughan it is within these commonplace miracles that female empowerment is to be found. The fact that these everyday displays of female power are ignored by the ruling patriarchal system diminishes the system rather than women. Glythin and Megan survive within the hegemonic structure of their communities as they understand that "There be danger in differing from others. [...] Safety is in herd and flock, as cattle and sheep do know" (Vaughan, *Iron* 15, 20). Yet they survive on their own terms, slowly inculcating change not through a grand revolution, but in everyday relations with men, through one patriarch at a time.

## CHAPTER THREE: Supernatural Wales in the Work of

### Alice Thomas Ellis

#### Introduction

Alice Thomas Ellis, as a Catholic writer first and foremost, believes that supernaturalism is not only real, but tangible. For humanity to deny the existence of fairies and other preternatural beings it must also deny the existence of an Afterlife. Consequentially there is no potential for spiritual Redemption. In her *Contemporary Women Novelists* (1989), Flora Alexander comments on Ellis's eagerness in seeking out the existence of supernatural processes (85). The following discussion argues that, in counterpoint to the texts analysed in this thesis, Ellis's engagement with Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales does not overtly participate in interrogating such narratives as conduits of patriarchal or imperialist discourses. Instead, Ellis pursues a discrete and idiosyncratic mode which centres upon her spiritual belief system.

Entwined in Ellis's personal tenet is the concept of simultaneity, which means that there are two modes of existence; one is material reality experienced as everyday human life and the other is entirely preternatural. In *Imagined Communities* (2006), Benedict Anderson argues that simultaneity is essential in Judeo-Christian belief systems (24). This also accords with Welsh myth, fairy and folklore traditions. Ellis believes she is closest to a Catholic Eternity when she is in Wales as this is where the 'veil between this mode of existence and another is fragile and transparent' (Ellis, *Wales Anthology* xiv). This unseen world, which is

nevertheless still tangible, is Ellis's 'irreducible mythical space' (Tuan 87).

Within Catholic and Welsh traditions, two modes of being (human and metaphysical) occupy the same space and, for Ellis, Wales is where the boundary between the two is thinnest.

Like Hilda Vaughan, Ellis iterates how Christian mysticism is palimpsestic and assimilates a range of secular metaphysical paradigms, but she does not seek to recuperate her source tales. Rather, Ellis presents an esoteric engagement with the supernatural. I argue that when Ellis engages with Welsh myth, folk and fairy tale she does so from a conservative Catholic position that endorses simultaneous spiritual existence in the human world. However, because access to the spiritual realm depends on having faith in the numinous, only a select few humans can perceive this supernatural world. Yi-Fu Tuan asserts that 'Christianity [has] incorporated many of the symbols and rites of pagan antiquity into its own world view' (96) and therefore, for the Catholic Ellis, engaging with Welsh myth and folklore requires a specific belief system which is not necessarily bound by gender or nationality.

Alice Thomas Ellis, a pen name for Anna Haycraft, née Lindholm, was born in Liverpool in 1932 to a Welsh mother (Alexandra Griffiths from Cardiff, then Liverpool) and a father (John Lindholm) of Russo-Finnish descent living in Liverpool (Ellis, *Welsh Childhood* 4, and Colvin 'Obituary'). As a young child Ellis with her parents moved to Penmaenmawr, a village situated between Conwy and Bangor on the North Wales coast (Ellis, *Welsh Childhood* 3). At the age of nineteen she converted to Catholicism, embarking on a new life as a postulant nun. She suffered a spinal injury, and after a period of recovery, was refused re-

admittance to the order, prompting her move to London. Ellis married Colin Haycraft and spent much of her life in the rearing of children, having five sons and two daughters; four of her sons were born before she was thirty (Ellis, *Welsh Childhood* 79).

Ellis suffered the loss of one daughter, born prematurely and surviving for two days, and one son who died aged nineteen after falling from a roof whilst trainspotting at Euston Station (Colvin 'Obituary'). As a devout and conservative Catholic, she found solace in her religion, the mystical elements of which validated her belief in the very real continuance of her children's existence after death. *The Sin Eater*, her first novel, was published in 1977 when Joshua was still in a coma after his fall (Colvin 'Obituary'). Ellis was a prolific writer, publishing non-fiction and fiction over a thirty year period between 1979 and 1999. Of her publications, the following texts engage most clearly with Wales and therefore they have been selected for analysis in this chapter: *The Sin Eater* (1977), *The Birds of the Air* (1980), *Unexplained Laughter* (1985) and *Fairy Tale: A Novel* (1996).

Ellis's individualistic engagement with Welsh myth, fairy and folklore reflects her idiosyncratic status as a woman writer in the latter decades of the twentieth century. That is, as a conservative Catholic, she is often antagonistic to the emerging concept of 'Women's Writing' elucidated by the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. This is particularly interesting with regard to the position of myth, fairy and folklore scholarship. As we have seen in chapter one, these decades witnessed gynocentric recovery and reclamation projects of mythic and folkloric traditions. These projects and their pursuant literary critical debates

powered feminist discourses which could be mapped on to wider politico-cultural paradigms. Writing at the heart of this emergent feminist milieu, Ellis professes to be vaguely sympathetic to women's empowerment. She holds oblique material feminist views as she perceives a woman to be less vulnerable if she exists in marginality. She is, however, often openly critical of second-wave feminism branding its more radical concepts as 'codswallop' (Swatridge 10).

For Ellis, it seems that there have always been empowered women, whether the male historians and mythographers recorded them or not. Discussing her views on feminism in her non-fiction *Serpent on the Rock: A Personal View of Christianity* (1994), Ellis argues:

men had to go off and fight in futile battles getting their arms and legs chopped off, shot full of holes, enduring all manner of horrors. [...] I would have preferred to be third kitchen-maid in a boarding house overrun with cockroaches rather than valiant in some rat-infested trench in the Somme. (102)

Ellis finds it inexplicable that during the Gulf War (1990 – 1991), American women soldiers, despite having small children waiting for them at home, insisted on going to the front line of battle: 'That seems perverse beyond belief', she says (*Serpent* 104). Peter Conradi has interestingly proposed this maxim to be one of Ellis's literary strategies:

If you belong to an oppressed group, to pretend to be powerless can render you safe from attack, and at the same times secures you a privileged viewing-post from which to watch and comment on historical change and struggle. [...] In Ellis's case, a dippy 'feminine' *faux-naivete* has proved a very effective hiding-place from which some of the idiocies of the contemporary world and thought can be exposed. (Conradi 149)

For Alice Thomas Ellis, that is the ideal standpoint for women and children – safely on the sidelines. As a woman, there is a safety in marginality, in being the third kitchen-maid.

### Welsh and Catholic Mysticism

According to Alice Thomas Ellis, Wales has a ‘unique’ and ‘magical’ quality and abounds in sacred places, both pagan and Christian. In *Wales: An Anthology* (1989), she says: ‘on another level – and there are so many levels in the matter of Wales – there are ghosts and fairies and fabulous beasts’ (xiv). For Ellis, mystical Celticism is alive and shares her family home in North Wales. She describes how, ‘there is the thing that breathes outside our house on the long summer evenings and strikes an anvil behind the barns, and the people who talk in our parlour when we have all gone to bed’ (*Wales Anthology* xiv). The existence of supernatural beings is expressed as a lived fact. In the anthology she states: ‘I make no apology for this excursion into Celtic twilight. I like it in there’ (Ellis, *Wales Anthology* xv). This implies that Ellis feels that she is expected to apologise for romanticising Wales, but she does return to a romanticised, liminal Wales throughout her fiction and non-fiction writing. She comments that ‘material “progress” is culturally impoverishing and custom should not be lightly discarded as though faith and old awarenesses were biodegradable’ (*Wales Anthology* xiv).

Commenting on the relationship between J.R.R. Tolkien’s conservative Catholicism and his engagement with fairy tales, Zipes notes how Tolkien ‘hated machines, industrialism and “progress” because they were signs that the human

being was being devalued and that money was being worshipped as the almighty god' (Zipes, *Breaking* 161). This provides an elucidating parallel with Ellis who also suggests that rationality and science means progress, and that can bring only 'violent and ruinous change' to Wales (Ellis, *Wales Anthology* xv). As Lucie Armitt has noted in her analysis of Ellis's *Fairy Tale: A Novel*, 'rural Wales is set up as the space of dream, legend and the supernatural [...] while London is the world of so-called common-sense and the technological present' (*Contemporary* 134).

In *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1982), Ruth Whittaker asserts that, for Spark, the physical world is 'irradiated and made significant by its spiritual dimension' (54). Spark 'accounts for this world in the light of another and she seeks to unify the two' (54). Both Ellis and Spark are Catholic writers and reflected in their work is an apparent dualism, whereby the world is an extension of a spiritual reality. These approaches differ from that of Tolkien. Zipes writes that Tolkien was 'acutely aware [...] that the essence of Christianity could only be conveyed to human beings in a secularized allegorical form' (*Breaking* 165). Ellis's engagement with the metaphysical realm is not allegorical. Rather, fantastic events are perceived in literal terms.

Within Ellis's complex treatment of Wales, Welsh nationality, spiritual beliefs and plural realities, a tension can be traced. There is a refusal to conform to a status quo; for example, she describes being shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1982 as being 'a nightmare,' 'ghastly,' and a 'joke' (Swatridge 10). Peter Conradi describes Ellis as having an 'innate and a "contrary" horror of belonging, and therefore of resembling others' (150). At the same time there exist thematic



patterns in her work, suggesting a certain obduracy in her creativity. In his introduction to the 2004 Virago edition of Ellis's *The Sin Eater* (1996), John Walsh (a close friend of Ellis) describes her as 'maternal, raffish, stern, gossipy, sweet, melancholy, religious and pagan by turns, and you could not keep up with her impossibly protean sensibility' (xii). And yet Walsh identifies very definite themes in her work, including the figure of the world-weary matriarch who is accompanied by a counterpoint floaty ingénue, bewildered by the modern world and alive to the numinous presences from religious and pagan folklore. The following reading examines these concerns in Ellis's *The Sin Eater*.

### *The Sin Eater* (1977)

*The Sin Eater*, Ellis's first novel, was published to great critical acclaim and according to Walsh: 'it was the start of a creative flood of slender, poised and quietly devastating fictions' (ix). Sin eating is mentioned just once in the narrative, when Rose (as a Catholic Irish immigrant) recounts how she was fascinated when she once witnessed preparations for the ritual.

Assembling at the Plâs, the grand house that overlooks the coastal village of Llanelys on the North Wales coast, the Captain's family await his imminent passing as he lies on his deathbed. His son Henry and daughter-in-law Rose, who live at the Plâs with him, play host to Michael, his second-born son and his wife Angela. Ermyn, the Captain's daughter, is 'calculatedly vague' (Walsh vii) and is a disappointment to her father. The dramatis personae are completed with Phyllis, the general housekeeper and carer of the Captain since his illness, her son Jack

(Jack the Liar) and her grandson, Gomer. At the end of the narrative, Phyllis avenges Gomer's sexual abuse at the hands of Michael by sabotaging Michael's car – she cut its brakes. Her action leads ultimately, in the final pages of the novel, to the likely death of Rose's twin children, Henry, Jack and Gomer himself. As the Captain lies dying the assembled kinsfolk organise and partake in the annual community cricket match in which the locals play against the 'boneddigion' (gentry) of the Plâs.

In *Serpent on the Rock*, Ellis proffers her motivations for writing *The Sin Eater*, those being her dissatisfaction with changes to Catholic principles and with second-wave feminism (24). Ellis developed an intense and lifelong abhorrence of the changes wrought in the Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965). During this reformation focus shifted away from Christian mythology so that much of the mystical elements of Catholicism were downgraded including, for example, the role of Mary and the Cult of Marion: consequently, the *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* was reformulated (Harrington 22). She states,

I was so annoyed that [...] I stirred out of my habitual indolence and wrote a book called *The Sin Eater*: I put it in the form of a novel, since novels give better scope for ungoverned rage [...]. The heroine was not a nice woman, for I was also fed up about women whining about their powerlessness. Women did the cooking, I reasoned, and thus held the power of life and death, apart from being the only people who could give birth. [...] Rose, as I called my creation, was a Roman Catholic who felt freed by the changes in the Church, not to express herself as a child of God liberated from the old constraints, but to behave as badly as she liked, given over to original sin. (*Serpent* 24)

The upheaval of dogmatic principles and practices in the Catholic church was distressing to Ellis, who describes herself as ‘bereft and consequently resentful’ (*Serpent* 24). Ellis seemingly yearns for an earlier Wales, the land of saints of the fifth and sixth centuries. This Wales existed in its own right. Outside Rome it was (with Ireland) the centre of the Catholic world with its flourishing Celtic Christian church (Robinson 22).

Rose, the female protagonist of *The Sin Eater*, becomes a focal point for Ellis’s contempt for Vatican II and the ‘poor me’ stance that sits at the centre of feminist politics (as Ellis views it). Rose is a Roman Catholic of Irish descent whose large family are immigrants to North Wales (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 14, 15). As Ellis’s ‘creation’, Rose enables Ellis to ‘express herself’, in order to discuss and lament the attrition of Catholic mysticism in the mid-twentieth century. Rose is presented as a woman who embraces her role as a wife and mother to twins, ‘competent, beautiful children, not the sort to come to harm’ (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 1) – a comment that offers a chilling foreshadowing of the novel’s conclusion.

This foreshadowing is consolidated in the observation that: ‘The momentary chill of parting was indistinguishable from the wind that came up from the sea even on the best of days’ (Ellis *Sin Eater* 3). This is echoed as Rose anticipates the return of her children at the end of the novel. In the final paragraphs of the narrative, Rose ‘turned her head a little from the wind that sometimes came up from the sea even on the best of days’ (184). And after Phyllis realises the imminent peril which threatens the twins: ‘Up on the hills the wind swept softly around the old church where the saint slept on undisturbed’ (*Sin*

*Eater* 187). The chill wind of parting can be felt from the opening pages through to the panic of the closing scene.

In the opening pages of *The Sin Eater*, Rose ruminates upon the landscape in front of her, a landscape that is closely bound to the local Saint. She recalls the legend of the castle that stood inland and which was occupied by a drunken and debauched prince who did not heed warnings that the sea was encroaching upon the castle.<sup>7</sup> The ocean eventually overtook the castle, drowning all who remained within its walls. The prince's daughter 'who disapproved of him, had led the survivors up here [where Rose sits] to watch as the sea washed over their fields and their farms. That was the legend. [...] "Let them drink their fill," the princess had remarked as the tide rose. It sounded worse in Welsh' (*Sin Eater* 2).

The legend of the prince's daughter is told in two parts, the first being at the opening of the novel where the drowning of the castle is related. On a walk into the mountains surrounding the Plâs, the legend is further iterated by Rose. In an abortive hunting trip a neighbouring prince killed and ate the Saint/princess's pet lamb and in retaliation she caused him to die

in a dreadful manner, which the legend left unspecified. She had always been a bad-tempered and spiteful girl, given to lecturing her father and his court on their profligate ways and showing no concern at all when the flood overtook them. [...] Of the lamb it was said that its bones lay concealed in the churchyard and took on flesh and wool and life every spring. (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 71)

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<sup>7</sup> This drowned castle refers to the legend of Llys Helig. Helig had a daughter, Gwendud, whose greed cursed the castle and its occupants: during a celebration the sea, without warning, flooded the castle (W.J. Thomas *The Welsh Fairy Book* 150-152).

There is a suggestion here of a palimpsest of the supernatural, Romano Catholic and Celtic-Christianity of medieval Wales, the local landscape of North Wales, mythic Welsh women (princess Gwendud and Saint Melangell) and the conflation of time, where the lamb is resurrected every spring. When Rose is clearing Gomer's spilt blood off the garden path, Ermyn asks her "'Who was it tooketh away the sins of the world?'" (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 180). "'The lamb of God,'" said Rose, "of course'" (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 180). Here, the lamb imagery recalls Jesus, likened to a sacrificial lamb when he was killed and then resurrected, an event also (of course) celebrated every springtime at Easter.

Ellis's presentation of Wales as a liminal space of Celtic-Christian mysticism can be directly related to the title of the novel and the leitmotif that springs from it. According to Sikes, sin eating was a popular custom throughout Wales (being practiced in Scotland and England to a much lesser extent). It was first mentioned in cultural records dating back to 1636 and was still apparently being practiced in Swansea until the 1830s, thereafter the ritual fell from favour and ceased to be overtly performed (Sikes 326).

Sikes describes the tradition as a ritual that took place over a dead body when the deceased person's relatives hired a nominated person as a 'sin eater.' The body would be laid out and bread and beer passed over the chest of the corpse to the sin eater, who would duly eat the victuals. 'He took on him ipso facto all the sins of the defunct and freed him or her from walking the earth after death' (Sikes 326). Believers in the ritual would keep mazard bowls in readiness for such a time and would request the presence of a sin eater at their funeral in their Will and Testaments. In other versions of the ritual, a plate of salt would be placed on

the chest of the deceased, and on the salt, a slice of bread. An incantation would be said over the bread, and the bread eaten by the sin eater who would thereby ingest the sins of the dead (Sikes 326). Other versions, belonging specifically to the Swansea and Chepstow localities, involved the tracing of a cross in the salt and the quartering of a lemon or apple that would be placed on the salt in lieu of bread. A lighted candle (to keep away evil spirits) might also be placed in the salt:

This done [the sin eater] received his fee [...] and vanished from the general gaze; for as it was believed that he really appropriated to his own use and behoof the sins of all those over whom he performed the [sin eating] ceremony, he was utterly detested in the neighbourhood – regarded as mere Pariah – as irredeemably lost. (Sikes 326)

The sin eater, as a Pariah, becomes the scapegoat of the community, being imbued with the spiritual impurities of the deceased members of that community.

As a shamanic figure and a scapegoat who bears the iniquities of humanity, the sin eater role presents parallels with the religious scapegoat of the Old Testament (Leviticus 16:21), the Catholic symbolism of Christ as sacrificial lamb, and the Welsh Saint's murdered pet lamb. The sin eater becomes a liminal figure, personifying the cross-over between life and death, physicality and spirituality, this world and the next. The sin eater of the novel's title yet again represents Ellis's belief that Wales itself is a borderland between corporeity and the numinous in a way that is cognate with Celtic-Christianity (the act of sin eating as unction of the deceased to purify the soul of sins).

Further, Ellis's engagement indicates the complex status of sin eating in Wales. Sin eating is a form of Catholic extreme unction, a process of soul cleansing abrogated under the Tudors' 'state-enforced switch from Roman

Catholicism to Protestantism’ (Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* 176). In Wales Nonconformist dicta forbade such practices ‘which openly flouted the teachings of the New Testament and its emphasis on the fact that Christ, through voluntarily dying on the cross, had become the universal scapegoat for all humanity’s sins’ (Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* 175). Jane Aaron argues that, consequently, sin eating was practised surreptitiously as a replacement of extreme unction (*Welsh Gothic* 176). This problematic status of sin eating, traced to complex transitions between Catholicism and Nonconformity, finds parallel in Ellis’s idiosyncratic relationship with Catholicism and the shifts within its theology and practices. Like Protestants who practice extreme unction surreptitiously through sin eating, Ellis indicates a fascination with this Celtic-Christian tradition: it shares roots with a mysticism which the post-Vatican Council II now disapproves of and which Ellis yearns for.

As a leitmotif the act of sin eating echoes through *The Sin Eater*. The rituals of cooking and eating are prevalent in the narrative and are primarily associated with Rose. In her study of *The Sin Eater*, Sarah Sceats discusses Rose’s use of food as a means of gaining power over others or over a social situation. ‘Its effectiveness [relies] on a degree of implied knowledge often hidden from the other characters, and not always spelt out for the reader’ (Sceats 143). Rose is particularly interested in the sin eating tradition; once, on seeing it performed she ‘had been enthralled – could hardly wait for the service to end. “Did you see that?” she kept saying. “Did you see? The *cwpan y meirw*, the cup of death”’ (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 94).

Ellis explicitly indicates her belief in women’s empowerment through gender defined tasks such as food preparation in her short story ‘The Cat’s

Whiskers' published in 1994, in which an upper-middle-class housewife prepares a picnic lunch for her husband to take to a pheasant shoot. Whilst her husband dresses, she decides to feed the cat with her husband's preferred pâté and 'emptied the tin of cat food into a basin and began mashing it up with a fork, breaking up its carefully chosen meaty chunks. [...] Then she spread it on the bread and closed the sandwiches' (Ellis, 'Cat's Whiskers' 51). Knowing that salt is detrimental to her husband's blood pressure, she adds salt and also a watercress garnish, which reminds her of a wreath, in 'an attempt to conceal the fact that here in these tender morsels we have mortality' (Ellis, 'Cat's Whiskers' 51). We find an early echo of this position in *The Sin Eater*, where Rose decided that of the 'many ways of killing a cat, the easiest way was to choke it to death with cream: it involved no coercion, no show of force, and even looked like kindness' (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 93). In her short story, there are parallels between the wife and Rose, and between death and consuming food, thus crystallising how food, death, women's domestic role, and women's power commingle. This commingling begins in *The Sin Eater*, her first novel, and can be charted throughout three decades of her writing.

In *The Sin Eater* there are two women who prepare food for the inhabitants of the Plâs. Rose is 'enthralled' by sin eating and controls social situations and manipulates the living with her culinary skills, whilst Phyllis is Welsh, a suspected sin eater, and also a cook for the family. Rose notes that Phyllis is peripheral to the Llanellys community because she:

had never been popular [...] and was suspiciously good at the tasks that other, more sensitive, people preferred not to undertake. She could strangle chickens, tend the dying, lay out the dead. [...] Rose affected to believe that Phyllis had made a pact with the Captain and would serve the



funeral baked-meats from his chest, herself eating up the crumbs, together with all his sins, according to the old Welsh custom. (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 26)

Throughout the narrative, both women, in turn, prepare and present meals, which are consumed by all those staying at the Plâs. All the while, the Captain is quietly dying in his room. In this context, in every scene where food is consumed, there is a symbolic act of sin eating. All who partake of food in the Plâs and its environs are eating (metaphorically) funeral baked-meats – the food served over the deceased Captain. The Captain's sins find their home in his living descendants and become exacerbated as the narrative progresses. According to Catholic dogma all humanity bears the Sins of the Father. In Ellis's *The Sin Eater*, the sin eating concept becomes a perverted, inverted Eucharist; the family assembled at the Plâs to oversee the death of the Captain, unknowingly (through sin eating) ingest the sins of the Captain/Father. This accords with Aaron's reading of *The Sin Eater*: she suggests that, 'each generation inherits the poison of past generations to the destruction of innocence and youth, the scapegoats for sins not their own' (*Welsh Gothic* 190).

At the conclusion of *The Sin Eater*, when Phyllis, like a 'furtive [...] assassin' (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 185) damages Michael's car, the significance of sin eating at the Plâs is revealed in a chilling denouement. Phyllis and Rose have, as marginal outsiders, enjoyed an unparalleled view of the 'idiocies' (Conradi 149) and double-standards of the Captain's family and the wider community. Through their cooking they have prepared food as an implied form of sin eating (for example, during the local cricket match), and they too have eaten food at the Plâs whilst the Captain is dying. However, they underestimate the consequences of sin

eating and are too short-sighted to realise that as outsiders, it is they who are the sin eaters and not the family or the community on whom they pass judgement. This is manifested not only in Phyllis's vengeful act, but in the consequences of her subterfuge.

Phyllis does not anticipate Michael not driving his own car that morning. Instead Henry takes it to pick up Jack, Gomer and the twins who are stranded 'over the pass' (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 184). In the moment that Rose innocuously informs Phyllis that it is Henry, Jack and the children who will travel in the sabotaged car, Rose asks:

"Phyllis, where are you going?"

But the silence was total, obdurate as the torturer, unheeding and dumb.

The kitchen was empty. Phyllis was running as fast and futilely as the wind from the sea. Somewhere, in another world, someone was howling as the sin eaters of old must have howled, fleeing the houses of sorrow weighed down with strange sins. Up on the hills the wind swept softly around the old church where the saint slept on undisturbed. (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 187)

Just as, traditionally, a sin eater is Pariah and scapegoat of the community, Rose and Phyllis are imbued with all of the spiritual impurities caused by the sins of the Captain/Father. Rose and Phyllis will represent, and bear the burden of, the iniquities of humanity, through the death of Jack, Henry, Gomer and the twins.

### *The Birds of the Air* (1980)

*The Birds of the Air* centres on Mary Marsh, a mother mourning the death of her teenage son Robin, who is buried in Wales. Mary has moved in with her mother,

Mrs Marsh, and the action takes place in an English suburb, over the days of Christmas celebration, during which Mary's sister, Barbara, and her family arrive to partake in the celebratory traditions of the season. The secrets, lies, tensions and strained emotions of her family swirl around Mary, who, in the depths of her grief, has detached herself from humanity generally, in order to await peacefully her own death: 'She supposed she must be dying, and wondered whether, if she touched the window pane with her cold finger, the cold would seep in from outside as though osmosis' (Ellis, *Birds* 7). Desiring to be left alone in quiet contemplation and recollection she suffers through the chaotic Christmas lunch so painstakingly created by her mother.

Mary's daydreams take the form of reminiscences of actual past events, of imaginative leaps from England to Wales, a place that is (for Mary) capable of tangible existence in the present and future also. In all episodes, the daydream relates to Wales, specifically to the house named *Melys y Bwyd* (in English, Sweet is the Food), and the Welsh village in which it stands. Mary and her family are English and travelled to Wales to holiday in the 'high-hedged, stone-walled cottage, safely away from the traffic' (Ellis, *Birds* 18).

*The Birds of the Air* exemplifies Ellis as a Catholic writer whose Christianity is bound to her belief that Wales has a closer proximity to heaven than anywhere else in the world. The novel's title can be traced to a liturgical source, in which the birds of the air carry careless words and report them to the Heavens (Ecclesiastes 10:20). Also on the Day of Judgment, every person will have to account for every careless word they have spoken, for by their words they will be either acquitted or condemned (Matthew 12:36, 12:37). Robin, the dead

son who exists in a transubstantiated form in Wales, symbolises Jesus; likewise his mother, Mary, mourns him and the action occurs at a time, Christmas, which marks the conflation of pagan Winter solstice rituals with Christian celebrations of Christ's birth. Furthermore, an etymological study of the name Robin provides overt parallels with folklore connecting Jesus Christ and robins. Here again is Ellis's insistence on Wales being a liminal space in which Christian and Welsh mythology overlap, a point to which I will return.

At the beginning of the narrative the multiple signification of Wales in Mary's mind is set out, as Mary recreates *Melys y Bwyd* through memory.

Mary remembered the lane, pretty as a wedding, when she was a child [...].

It was a long time ago. Since then, down that wedding lane, dazed with summer, Robin had come, borne in a slow black hearse sorrowful with dying wreaths – Robin passive beyond understanding, disguised as stone. Stone-faced, calm, closed and cold; marbled with dissolution and grave with the gravity of earth, all flowering ceased. (Ellis, *Birds* 19)

Here Mary has conflated the spheres of time, memory, place, and human rites of passage such as childhood, marriage, and death. Although Mary and her son Robin are English, Mary chose to bury Robin in Wales, in the environs of *Melys y Bwyd*, in the liminal space where parallel worlds converge so that he may continue to exist within the supernatural and human worlds. By placing his physical body in Wales, a crossroads between natural and supernatural worlds, Mary has ensured the continuation of her son's 'life'.

Alicia Ostriker and Lucie Armitt have both commented upon the treatment of time and space within women's writing and how they intersect; women authors frequently, they argue, present time and space as a spiral rather than linearly.

Ostriker discusses the work of H.D., in particular her representation of time and space in her extended poem *Helen in Egypt*. 'Far from representing history as a decline, or bemoaning disjunctions of past and present, her poems insist that past and present are, for better or worse, essentially the same' (330). Ostriker also draws attention to H.D's concept of the 'palimpsest' which has become a motif in women's writing – time is layered so that the past is not then but now (330).

Armitt suggests that Wales is 'in ongoing contact with the "space" of the past, an issue linking space and time in a chronotopic entity' (*Contemporary* 134). Ellis speaks of time and history where 'all the layers of the past have been fractured and splintered together' (*Welsh Childhood* 40). For Mary Marsh, time does not progress linearly and is, instead, helical. There is a yearning for time and space to be flat so as to lessen the physical, emotional and spiritual distance between mother and deceased son.

In each of Ellis's novels analysed in this chapter there is an almost constant presence of birds, bird references or bird metaphors (Crowe 123, 124). Obvious examples include her text's title, and Robin, Mary's dead son. Birds which symbolise death and re-birth are common to both Catholicism and Welsh mythology. Within *The Mabinogion* the Birds of Rhiannon sing the living to sleep whilst awakening the dead (S. Davies 33, 196, 230), and Branwen's starling delivers her from mistreatment and instigates the Welsh-Irish war (S. Davies 28). A Welsh folktale tells of Aderyn y Corff (corpse bird) (Sikes 212) which sings at the door of those marked for death and is similar to deryn y meirw (death bird) which taps on the house windows of those soon to be deceased. In Ellis's novel, Mary recalls that, before the news of Robin's death reached her, a 'bird had

knocked at the window of Melys y Bwyd [...]. She had tapped back at the bird through the brittle membrane of glass, waved her arms at it mockingly, shouted at it. Sad, black, desperate thing – it wouldn't go away. That means a death, the Welsh had told her' (Ellis, *Birds* 56). Like the Biblical Mary, and Rose in *The Sinner*, Mary Marsh has a son, Robin, marked for death; her child's fate is already written.

The Robin/robin redbreast becomes a leitmotif bearing folkloric and Christian symbolism. Mary describes robins as being fierce because they attack, and slay, other birds (Ellis, *Birds* 13). This is in direct contrast to Mrs Marsh's romanticised view of robins on Christmas cards and of the robin who 'had tried to pluck the thorns from the crown of Jesus and soaked his little breast in red blood' (Ellis, *Birds* 13). Mrs Marsh then, almost comically, feels 'annoyance with Mary's Robin for being dead' (Ellis, *Birds* 13) because forever more, for Mrs Marsh, robins will be associated with death and pain. The romantic version has been tainted, just as the Robin of the popular nursery rhyme 'Who Killed Cock Robin' is a victim of murder. Here Ellis reveals her knowledge of the Christian myth that accompanies the robin, but there is more to it than that. The robin is paradoxical in its relationship with humanity.

Robert Fletcher notes that the robin is affectionate, loyal and an invariable friend and 'benefactor to the human race', 'helping the innocent and oppressed' (99, 107). Robins make their home near to humans and accept hospitality graciously, particularly in the winter months, the season with which they are associated (Fletcher 99). Here we have the robin associated with birth / death cycles of the winter solstice, Christian Advent and Christmas celebrations, and the

British New Year. The bird is also known for its ‘pious care for the unburied dead’, which it covers ‘with moss and leaves and flowers’ (Fletcher 101, 103). The bird is also known in Wales for comforting damned souls in Hell: ‘the merciful [robin] takes cool dew on his little bill and lets it fall on sinful souls in torment [...] The marks of the fire that scorches him as he drops the water are to be seen on his red breast’ (W.J. Thomas 304). Thus, the robin redbreast has, through antiquity, been closely associated with death and unselfish love.

Mary evokes bird imagery associated with Catholicism, but she also draws on Welsh mythos, specifically that of Rhiannon’s birds: Mary demands that ‘the birds of the air should mourn for Robin and all the vast hordes of the dead’ (Ellis, *Birds* 46). Marion E. Crowe argues that the novel explores a ‘universal need for [Christian] conversion’ as it is a version of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) (108). For Crowe, Ellis dramatises an Advent story portraying a ‘world on the brink of the Incarnation, yet so turned in on itself and mired in sin and joyless frivolity that it is unaware of the nearness of the object of its deepest longing’ (127). Following this argument, I argue that in *The Birds of the Air*, Ellis images humanity as a vast horde which is spiritually dead and when the Birds of Rhiannon sing, humanity will be awakened to the possibility of divine redemption. In this instance, only Mary is ‘poised to recognise the inbreaking of the divine’ (Crowe 127).

Further, in recalling the Welsh traditional understanding of robins which traverse interstices between the human realm and Hell in order to comfort lost souls, we see Ellis presenting Mary in a type of hell-on-earth, waiting for her

robin/Robin to console her. In a moment of meditation in Mrs Marsh's back garden:

[Mary] lifted her face to the angelic descent in the muted darkness, to the movement compelled by something other than desire, the lifeless idle movement of the drowned, to the veil, grave cloths, the floating sinking cerements, untroubled by blood, by colour: the discrete, undeniable, intractable softness of the slow snow in the night and the silence...

"Robin...?" she said. (Ellis, *Birds* 152)

Here, it is suggested that the thin veil between modes of existence is ruptured.

Christian eternity reveals itself to Mary as she perceives the gentle snow fall, the 'gentle alien blossom' (Ellis, *Birds* 151) to be another cryptic clue indicating God's self-revelation and the continued life of her son in supernal Wales.

### *Unexplained Laughter* (1985)

In *Unexplained Laughter* the narrative focuses on Lydia, a free-lance journalist with an Epicurean, off-centre morality and keen sense of wicked fun, who is escaping London and the still fresh hurts caused by her most recent lover's infidelity. Lydia arrives at her holiday cottage in north Wales accompanied by an unwelcome but tolerated acquaintance, Betty. Their nearest neighbours are a Welsh farming family; Hywel and his wife, Elizabeth, who care for Hywel's sister Angharad. She is a mute child who has unspecified special needs so that she requires medical supervision by the local Doctor Wyn. Wyn is engaged to a local businessman's daughter, but is having an affair with Elizabeth, a relationship



which Angharad witnesses but cannot disclose. Lydia strikes up an awkward friendship with Beuno, a priest who is also Hywel and Angharad's brother.

Lydia is another of Alice Thomas Ellis's sardonic female protagonists who casts a disdainful eye over the moral degeneration of all humanity, and so is able to perceive what others are too ignorant or busy to notice. As a result, Lydia is closely associated with Angharad who haunts the Welsh valley as if she were a changeling or metaphysical being but she is also tenuously linked to *The Mabinogi's* Blodeuwedd. Ellis further develops her interest in Welsh changelings and their relationship to idiosyncratic English women in her last publication, *Fairy Tale: A Novel* (1996).

Lydia and Angharad are the sources of the title's laughter. Doubled, they are connected on a psychical plane because of their idiosyncratic perspectives born from their marginal status. Both, to some degree, choose to be peripheral as they recognise that such marginality allows a clearer viewpoint from which to judge the centre. Such laughter and marginality, aligned with women as a source of power and judgement, chimes with Rose and Phyllis in *The Sin Eater*. One evening, in the Plâs's kitchen, Ermyn comments that 'anyone watching [Rose and Phyllis] would have thought they were both mad, laughing at a joke they in no way shared, alone in the night-time kitchen' (Ellis, *Sin Eater* 170). Furthermore, Ellis elucidates the commingling of marginality, laughter, and women's power, in her short story 'The Cat's Whiskers'. When talking to her cat, the housewife explains human evolution, stating that:

Once upon a time our men [would] go hunting. [...] Now the women [...] stayed put round the mouth of the cave [...] and they ate the nuts and

berries that they picked off the trees and bushes, and they gossiped away among themselves and agreed what fools men were – risking their lives chasing big fat animals – and they laughed a lot. Like this...” And now she felt that she could laugh, and she did. [...] “They had to break up the women, you see. They feared a plot and also, [...] they knew damn well that what the women were saying about *them* would not give them comfort to hear. They could hear them laughing down by the river”. (45, 49)

Laughter in *Unexplained Laughter*, as in *The Sin Eater* and ‘The Cat’s Whiskers’, is almost carnival laughter as conceptualised by Bakhtin (12). But not quite, as although it is ‘ambivalent, [...] mocking, deriding, [as it] asserts, denies, it buries and revives’ (Bakhtin 12), it is not the universal laughter of the masses (Bakhtin 12). It is not ‘joyous and festive’ (Pearce 56). For Ellis, laughter signals the sharing of a private joke between women who through choice, or exclusion, inhabit socio-cultural peripheral zones, and who value their marginality in so much as it affords them a critical judgement of the centre. Laughter is figured as a disruptive force and it is gendered as a tool with which women might dismantle, or query, patriarchal regimes. It is entwined in Ellis’s conservative Catholic approach to feminism: she suggests that women are powerful and are most influential when marginally placed (*Serpent* 104). However, as is demonstrated in the quotation above, it is precisely these clear views which can expose women to men’s paranoia of women’s ‘secret will to power [...] which men must recognise and control’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 16). For Ellis, such paranoia is manifested in men’s fear of women’s laughter.

Margaret Atwood has discussed the disparity of gendered fear mechanisms reporting how men are afraid of women laughing at them, whilst women are afraid of men killing them (*Second Words* 413). I argue that Angharad’s obscure laughter and Lydia’s exultant laughter are examples of weapons; ‘of derision and

distancing', they signal a type of 'survival laughter' but are usually examples of laughter as 'satire [...] used as weapon, scathing and destructive' (Atwood *Second Words* 176). Commenting on comedy in Gothic texts, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik state that Gothic laughter is a 'tendency diametrically opposed to sympathy, helpfulness, and identification of the self with others' (14). In postcolonial literary theory, Baidick Bhattacharya explores the 'risible that disrupts' (293) Orientalising narratives. Ellis's laughing women in *Unexplained Laughter* use their lucid yet marginalised perspectives to perform an "unmasking" and disclosing of the unvarnished truth' (Pomorska 'Foreword' x). Their laughter is not representative of Bakhtinian carnival laughter as it is also a manifestation of Ellis's individualised, weaponized, 'cynical humour' (Pearce 56).

When Angharad foresees the arrival of her brother, Beuno, her laughter can be read as a mockery of Christian principles and of his hypocritical neglect of such principles: '*Hywel's brother Beuno is coming home. He is my brother too. It is his Christian duty to love me. Listen. I am laughing in the darkness*' (Ellis, *Unexplained* 14). Lydia and Angharad seemingly share a subversive nature and it is in this respect that they are mirrored characters, apparently doubled in their unexplained laughter. On hearing Angharad's distant laughter, Lydia asks: "'Why do you suppose I keep hearing laughter?'" (Ellis, *Unexplained* 54). Angharad and Lydia recognise the chaos within each other, and at the core of such affinity, is their laughter. Angharad hears Lydia's laughter in the same way that she hears the sounds of nature: '*I hear everything in the valley. All the sounds of the valley end here in my room*' (Ellis, *Unexplained* 9). And: '*Tonight I hear shouts. The woman from Ty Fach is laughing and shouting in the night*' (Ellis, *Unexplained* 122).

Angharad's mythical connection to Welsh landscape, and her doubling with Lydia, suggest that both women laugh in the night. Laughter, as a disruptive female force, also comes to represent the dark anarchy that ruptures out of Welsh mythology and out of Annwn into the Welsh landscape.

*Unexplained Laughter's* narrative is punctuated by Angharad's italicised internal monologues. It is also inferred that she is physically atypical, with her form being linked to Annwn. Catching a glimpse of Angharad, Lydia describes her as a 'ghost [and] an extraordinary creature' (Ellis, *Unexplained* 31). Lydia says to Betty:

'She looked at home in the graveyard. More at home than the ladies in hats who come on Sunday with chrysanthemums...' She was thinking that the girl might have lacked an umbilicus; might have come straight from the hand of God, who having finished making the mountains had picked a bit of clay from under his thumbnail and fashioned just one more sort of person, perhaps as an experiment. (Ellis, *Unexplained* 32)

Every one of Angharad's monologues has an element of revelation whereby the destruction and corruption that feeds creation and birth is starkly presented.

Angharad is able to acknowledge life and rebirth as well as the death and dissolution of the natural world, stating that:

*The hills are mine, and the living streams and the wind that breathes in the valley and the tiny white flowers that only I know because only I lie so close to the earth that I can see them move [...]. I have been dead for a long time and by day I circle the huge air above the hills and by night I sleep in the quiet rock, as quiet as the rock, and the little worms mean consolation as they eat me. (Ellis, Unexplained 109)*

Although Angharad recognises her affinity with the Welsh landscape, she can only articulate it in her thoughts: therefore the reader and Angharad are aware of the relationship, but the characters within the narrative remain ignorant of it, apart from Lydia, who ‘thought how [...] Angharad seemed more part of the land than her family. If the land was a graven image then Angharad was its priestess’ (Ellis, *Unexplained* 101).

At the very beginning of the narrative, in her first monologue, Angharad comments upon the sounds of nature that surround her. ‘All I hear is the owl, flower-faced, calling once in the night’ (Ellis, *Unexplained* 7). Lydia has referred to Angharad as a ‘priestess of the land’ and Angharad herself implies her alliance with Blodeuwedd, the woman of flowers who was changed into an owl. *The Mabinogi*’s Blodeuwedd blurs the binary of victim and predator, just as Angharad and Docter Wyn will become both victim and perpetrator of each other’s downfall. Angharad is the *genius loci* of the Welsh landscape, but is now also a divinity of the Welsh mysticism that is bound to that landscape.

Angharad is mute, and her inability to communicate her complex thoughts and feelings is mistaken for an inability to possess them in the first place, a mistake not made by her brothers, Hywel and Beuno. The misconception and undervaluing of Angharad’s role in the narrative is also perpetuated by critics of the novel who describe her as ‘mute and backward’ (Conradi 158) and a ‘mad girl [...] endowed with an irritatingly mystical sense of unity with the earth’ (Gramich, ‘Both In and Out’ 264). The local doctor, Wyn, also confuses Angharad’s inability to speak with an inability to think and it is this error that becomes the crux of the unfolding action.

At the novel's conclusion, Angharad obliquely suggests that she is capable of bringing Wyn, the lascivious doctor, to account. This undoing is prompted by Lydia who discovers crude chalk drawings on an outcrop of rocks which depict the lewd behaviour of Wyn, and it becomes apparent that it is Angharad who is responsible for the pornographic pictographs. Wishing to embarrass Doctor Wyn, Lydia suggests that the outcrop of rocks would be a pleasant location for a picnic, an outing which includes his fiancée.

However, in revealing the pictures Lydia underestimates both Wyn's rage and Angharad's vulnerability as his patient. Referring to her journalism when she is leaving Wales, and after the drawings have been revealed, she teases Wyn by saying she would only write a story about him if he murders someone. She notes to herself: 'Was it her imagination or did he look suddenly aghast? Had she hit some unseen nail on the head?' (Ellis, *Unexplained* 154). There is a suggestion that Lydia has accidentally stated his plan for Angharad.

Ellis's conservative Catholic tenets which influence her perception of feminism focus upon women's power springing from their marginal position and when they live as a collective. For Ellis, women are at their most powerful when they occupy a marginal all-female community (this recalls Ellis's time spent as a postulant nun). She obliquely endorses a protectionist sisterhood. Further, she suggests that this sisterhood threatens men and consequently such gynocentric communities are often broken by men who fear 'a plot' ('Cat's Whiskers' 49). However, Lydia does not protect Angharad and instead exposes this already vulnerable child to further danger, before abandoning that child to face Doctor Wyn's wrath alone. This indicates Ellis's ambivalent attitude to feminism and is

an instance of how Ellis treats Welsh mysticism and Catholic mysticism differently. Her short story 'The Statue' (1994) demonstrates both of these points.

In 'The Statue', a harassed Catholic housewife visits her parish church at the end of a busy shopping day, just before Christmas. Sitting beside a plaster statue of a female saint, she notices the serene countenance upon the moulded face and is jealous of such tranquillity. The saint hears the housewife's comments and suggests that they swap places for the holidays. Quickly recovering from the initial shock of speaking to a statue, the housewife agrees and finds herself occupying a plaster-moulded body whilst retaining full cognizance. As an effigy, she holds hyacinths in her hand and this suggests that she is Saint Dorothy (1347 – 1394) (Thiselton-Dyer 157) a patron of brides, widows and parents of large families. As Saint Dorothy she hears the prayer of an abused wife. The wife implores the saint/housewife for help, which is proffered. The abusive husband attends Mass and when he is alone in the church the saint/housewife:

leaned swiftly forward, seized him by the collar so that he was forced to look into [her] face, and remarked in a low but positive tone, "If you don't stop drinking and beating your wife, you bastard, you will be very, very sorry." Then [she] dropped him and stood back in the niche, stone-still and silent. (Ellis, 'The Statue' 90)

After the Christmas celebrations, the saint and the housewife resume their original roles and the housewife learns that the chastised husband now abstains from alcohol and violence; he has become a model father and husband. Within Ellis's perception of Catholicism women are thus able to participate in a protectionist sisterhood based on shared belief systems which include ethical and moral dicta. In *Unexplained Laughter*, Ellis endorses such a sisterhood by obliquely criticising

Lydia's abandonment of Angharad and by suggesting the potential consequences of her actions – Angharad could be murdered.

Through Angharad's alterity and her correlation with the mythic character of Blodeuwedd she is cursed to inhabit a complex position similar to that of the owl-woman: she is between worlds as both prey and predator. Thus Angharad represents forbidden knowledge, the marginal and silenced. According to Ellis's ambivalent conservative feminism, this marginality provides Angharad with protection and a power base for as long as she remains marginal. Within the human realm, she is unable to occupy a space in a protectionist community of women and as such she is vulnerable to a man who fears her ridicule, or of her exposing him to ridicule. As a disruptive female, she has a profane knowledge which is at odds with Doctor Wyn, who is a human, a man of scientific logic, and is a man who fears the laughter of women: of women *laughing and shouting in the night*' (Ellis *Unexplained* 122).

### *Fairy Tale: A Novel* (1996)

*Fairy Tale: A Novel* presents seventeen-year-old Eloise and her boyfriend Simon, both born in London, who move to rural seclusion in Wales. Here they live in peaceful, if boring tranquillity. Eloise sews nightdresses for the local boutique and Simon works at odd-jobs in the surrounding farms. The couple are aware, on a subconscious level, that they are watched, a feeling that grows after Eloise is visited by four men in suits. It is revealed, in the second section of the narrative, that the men are in fact the Tylwyth Teg, masquerading as humans. Their



peculiarity, as humanoid fairies, is felt particularly by Miriam, Eloise's godmother who visits the young couple in Ty Coch. The Tylwyth Teg impregnate Eloise so that she bears a changeling child. Trouble ensues when Eloise refuses to give the baby to them, prompting Miriam to intervene as a peacemaker. The child is returned and the humans leave Ty Coch. They depart with no recollection of these events as the fairies, using magic, remove all their memories of Ty Coch.

Eloise and Simon's rented house, Ty Coch, is described by Miriam as 'old and weathered, and since it stood alone did not look out of place, only different: a fairy-tale house sprung up by chance in a strange landscape' (Ellis *Fairy Tale* 60), a landscape that is 'cartographically placeless' (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 92). The Tylwyth Teg and the Kings of the Heights have been relying upon human women to bear and birth hybrid fairy children since their Queens were banished by 'a peripatetic holy man', 'long ago before time or words could tell' (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 198, 112). Thus the Tylwyth Teg rely on human women to gestate fairy babies – which they are required to hand over immediately after their delivery.

The house's name, Ty Coch, is significant as it means 'Red House', so-called for its connection to blood – menstrual and post-partum blood from the human women whom the male Tylwyth Teg impregnate, or the blood of women who refuse to give up their newborn infant, and of the spilled blood of human men who threaten the fairies' reproductive process. Armitt argues that its redness, and its place in a 'matrilineal inheritance', are suggestive of 'the female reproductive cycle' (*Contemporary* 137). Ty Coch is shunned by the local Welsh community as it is historically a place of mystery, human sacrifice, murder, insanity, and

ruination for whoever resides there (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 102, 128, 198). However, women, as the bearers of new Tylwyth Teg, are always welcome at Ty Coch.

Another woman to arrive in Ty Coch is Clare, Eloise's mother, who joins the trio in the red house and all, except Eloise, are astounded when Eloise returns to the house after a walk in the hillsides, carrying a newborn child – allegedly her own child. Eloise had been chosen by the leaders of the Tylwyth Teg, the Kings of the Heights, to bear a changeling child, hybrid fairy and human, which she was supposed to leave behind in the care of the watchers. In a scene of diplomacy Miriam meets with the Kings in an effort to remedy the antagonism caused by Eloise's failure to return the changeling child. With the help of fairy vodka Miriam's ability to recognise the fairies allows her to deal with them on *their* terms, without losing her own comprehension of the world. According to their wishes she throws the child into a nearby waterfall where it transforms into a ceffyl dwr (a water horse) as soon as it touches the water. Its human foster family leave Wales, and the Tylwyth Teg, their minds washed clear of all the events that have befallen them.

Here, Ellis's naming of Eloise and Miriam is significant. Eloise is a variant name of the French, Héloïse, who lived in twelfth-century France and who bore a child which caused consternation in her family as they did not approve of her husband, Pierre Abelard (Calabrese 1). For Calabrese, Héloïse is 'one of those distinct, if not rare [medieval] women [who] speaks for herself [and] flouts any attempt at silencing and speaks boldly until she gets what she [wants]' (3). In *Fairy Tale*, however, Eloise is another example of Ellis's 'floaty ingénues' (Walsh x), akin to Ermyn and Angharad, and so is not the outspoken, bold and

determined copy of her medieval namesake. However, she does refuse to willingly part with her child and it is this streak of independence which aggravates the Tylwyth Teg, to such an extent that they would kill her in order to retrieve the child. In this respect Ellis's Eloise, like Héloïse, is an agent of 'scandal' and 'chaos' (Calabrese 1), in Annwn and West Wales.

Miriam is Eloise's godmother, representing and fulfilling a Christian guardianship not just to Eloise but to her changeling child; it is Miriam who takes control of the dangerous situation at Ty Coch by negotiating with the fairies, thus instigating a re-ordering of a disrupted regimen whilst ensuring safe passage of the humans from Ty Coch. Ellis's entwining of Biblical and folkloric traditions can be traced with reference to the Judeo-Christian figure of Miriam. Walker elucidates etymological variants of this 'Miriam' citing the name as a form of Mary the Mother of God (585) and as a Semitic name for Goddess Mari, another version of Mary, also to be found in the Welsh language amongst others. Ellis has noted in the introduction to her edited anthology that Wales was once dedicated as a holy land to the Virgin Mary (*Wales Anthology* xiv). There are also similarities to Mary Marsh and *her* identification with the Biblical Mary. By so naming Miriam, Ellis's texts once again entwine Judeo-Christian traditions and Welsh folkloric changeling traditions, thus indicating an unwavering insistence on presenting Wales, through a frame of Welsh and Catholic mysticism, as a liminal site.

Enid Dame, discussing Jewish women poets' re-imagining of the Biblical Miriam, sister to Moses, describes her as 'both powerful and elusive' (4); her name in Hebrew means 'bitter sea' and 'rebellion' (5). Ellis's Miriam throws a

male child into a waterfall, a direct reference to and inversion of the Moses story, in which the Biblical Miriam places a male child into the Nile for protection against Pharoah's demand for all Jewish male children to be killed (Dame 5; Exodus 1:22). The child is saved by being taken out of the water by Pharoah's wife and so Moses is a type of changeling child. In *Fairy Tale*, Miriam's casting the infant into the water could be read as infanticide, but in fact Ellis's Miriam is (in a contrary Welsh fairy world) protecting the changeling by returning it to its natural element.

As a Judeo-Christian guardian Miriam is a paradox as she represents unification and chaos; she defies Pharoah and works with her brothers to cohere the Jews (Dame 4). Unification and chaos offer an apt description of Miriam's role in *Fairy Tale* as she is able to negotiate anarchy represented by the Welsh fairies and restore order. She 'takes it upon herself to negotiate a strategy for [the humans'] collective retreat, complying with the Tylwyth Teg's insistence that the baby be returned to them on their terms' (Armitt *Contemporary* 145). This finds echo on a wider scale where she represents the top layer in a palimpsest of mythology: pagan lore has been consistently overlaid by Judeo-Christian lore. Here, Ellis has uncovered points of comparison and, like *The Birds of the Air*, has entwined Welsh and Biblical mythology.

In *Fairy Tale*, the Tylwyth Teg are part of their landscape, being able to metamorphose according to their own particular whims. In folkloric sources that delineate the divisions of the Welsh fairy race, the Tylwyth Teg, in all of their sub-divisions are invariably described as small. They are a pigmy race, similar in all outward appearances to humans, but are of a smaller stature. Their horses and

dogs too, are miniature (Roberts 6). Tony Roberts and Sikes state that there are numerous kinds of fairy with Sikes listing the various categories. The Ellyllon, pigmy elves who haunt groves and valleys, share an interesting characteristic with the fairies that Ellis chooses to present to the reader. Sikes's depiction of the Ellyllon includes their leader Gwyn ap Nudd, who is specifically named as a King. However, there are no corresponding Queens for this particular type of fairy (Sikes 14). Roberts further asserts that there is nothing ghostly about fairies; they are almost human with the women sometimes marrying humans and having children (although this may be a reference to the 'lady in the lake' legends of Wales) and they tend to use human mid-wives to nurse their young (Roberts 5, 6). These fairies eat poisonous mushrooms, like ale/alcohol and use natural sedatives, such as fox-glove leaves, to subdue humans.

Alice Thomas Ellis shares a similar knowledge of the Welsh fairy race. In *A Welsh Childhood* she informs the reader that:

Welsh fairies – the Tylwyth Teg – more resembled the human race: miniature people with miniature horses and dogs. They were richly dressed in red and green and were ruled over by Gwyn ap Nudd. On the whole they were well disposed towards humans and would perform household tasks on the receipt of a bowl of milk and some bread. I believe they lived [...] up on the hills and even under them. (35)

Ellis's fairies then bear a striking resemblance to the fairies detailed in the folkloric sources relating to Wales. She chooses to present the fairy kings in *Fairy Tale* as more human-like, perceived by the humans as being of human stature and requiring the same birthing process for their offspring.

As Ellis's narrative progresses, her strategically placed clues which hint at the supernatural origins of the humans who visit Ty Coch give way to her explicitly describing them as Welsh fairies. Drawing on W. Y. Evans Wentz, Armitt suggests that the Tylwyth Teg are characteristically fully, or partially, invisible (*Contemporary* 136). This accounts for their indeterminacy as Eloise, Simon, Clare and Miriam have difficulty in attaining any clear physical conception of them.

When the Tylwyth Teg arrived – for now Miriam had agreed to admit to herself that such they were, it seemed vain to deny it – the baby was slightly drunk but not incapable. [...] The largest of them turned to her – the shepherd – or was he the doctor or the policeman or was he perhaps the High King? (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 177)

This scene in which Miriam negotiates the handover of the changeling to the Tylwyth Teg reveals the true nature of the child and the visitors, and demonstrates how Ellis commingles fairy and human worlds. It also demonstrates how Ellis reworks the changeling tradition as well as the Tylwyth Teg. Her changeling child more closely resembles folkloric accounts of plentyn-newid than Hilda Vaughan's recuperative reworking, with Ellis's changeling appearing and behaving as definitively other.

When Eloise first presents the baby it has a 'pale, pale face and eyes as green as young willow leaves reflected in lake water, [with] silvery, silvery hair' (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 142). It glares back at Clare when she tries to hold it and gives Miriam 'a look of cold hatred' (Ellis *Fairy Tale* 168, 176). When Miriam and the child are left alone, and are waiting for the Tylwyth Teg:

the baby sat up and said, “Have they gone?” and Miriam said, “Yes,” and the baby said, “So let’s have a drink then,” and it climbed out of its cradle and waddled to the corner cupboard where the vodka was kept. Its silver hair hung down its back and its nappy hung to its knees. [...] The baby climbed back in its cradle with its bottle and proceeded to drink. [Miriam] too felt the need for a drink but the baby was emptying the bottle. (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 177)

The otherness of the child is implied in its appearance being linked to water and moonlight, and in its independence and its knowingness. Sikes describes plentyn-newid as being ‘ugly of face [with] something diabolical in his aspect’ and also as possessing a ‘supernatural cunning, not only impossible in a mortal babe, but not even appertaining to the oldest heads, on other than fairy shoulders’ (56, 56). In *Fairy Tale*, Ellis does not use the changeling tradition to recuperate that tradition so that it functions to reform gender relationships, as Hilda Vaughan does; instead Ellis presents the changeling as springing directly from cultural anthropological accounts.

The plentyn-newid’s supernaturalism is further underscored by it perceiving ‘hoofbeats in the lane [the] baby wanted to go into the night and leap on the back of the *ceffyl dŵr* and gallop away and away: its eyes were set on something distant and it slapped the flanks of its cradle and rocked back and forth’ (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 180). Again it is associated with water as the *ceffyl dŵr* is a water-horse. Ellis, reversing the Moses myth of a child being retrieved from water as a means of rescue, draws upon cultural anthropology to propose how Miriam is to return the changeling to Annwn. Sikes records how in Llanidloes a mother of twins suspected them to be changelings and was advised to test their supernatural cunning, which proved them to be so. Afterwards the mother ‘took the two children and threw them into the Llyn [lake]; and suddenly the goblins in their

blue trousers came to save their dwarfs, and the mother had her own children back again' (Sikes 61). Miriam is told to throw the changeling into a nearby waterfall.

Goodey and Stainton record how changeling children were murdered after being tortured, as the parents could 'focus their aggression directly on the child since, of course, it was not their own' (224). But thankfully, because Eloise's baby is a changeling, it 'leapt in Eloise's arms [and] it was no longer soft, no longer small. She was fighting to hold on to something that did not love her, something that sprung from her arms with a great howl of triumph and leapt down, down to the water that leapt up to meet it' (Ellis, *Fairy Tale* 191). Here Ellis draws directly on recorded folklore, producing a contemporary narrative which authenticates its sources: it does not recuperate, it validates.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, for Alice Thomas Ellis, Wales is a liminal space where dead children may live again. Birds anthropomorphise to become bearers of explicit and encoded meanings and haunt the texts, pecking at the windows of Ellis's Welsh houses and carrying bad omens from Annwn. They symbolise Christian virtues of suffering, grace, kindness and the eternal after-life, and yet are also bound to hobgoblins and violent anarchy. Flora Alexander concludes that 'in Ellis's novels themes are expressed through traditional Christian symbolism, interwoven with networks of imagery, and often blended with a rich fabric of reference from legend or fairy tale' (87). I would also add that Welsh legend, myth, fairy tale and folklore are the preferred referents for Ellis's particular mode



of writing and, as source material, validate her overarching personal belief framework.

Through close readings of Ellis's *The Sin Eater*, *The Birds of the Air*, *Unexplained Laughter* and *Fairy Tale: A Novel*, I have demonstrated how, for Ellis, Welsh myth, folklore and fairy tale are closely bound to mystical Wales. Further, the recognition of this fantastical essence is vital to an understanding of Wales, which is represented in these texts as a unique, numinous space. Ellis claims that:

there is something here [in Wales] I cannot describe – something like a vertical sense of tradition, of nourishment and sufficiency. [...] Perhaps the phrase I am looking for is genius of place. [...] For one thing Wales abounds in sacred places, both pagan and Christian: there are holy wells and shrines, the ways the pilgrims walked, and the bones of our saints lie under the ground. (*Wales Anthology* xiv)

Alice Thomas Ellis is unconcerned with feminist revisions of mythology because Welsh mythology, folk and fairy tales are perfect as they are; they provide a framework which suits her personal theistic beliefs. This also marks Ellis's texts as different from those of other contemporaneous writers whose interrogations of gender and national belonging underpin their engagements with Welsh myth, fairy tales and folklore.

Ellis's texts engage with Welsh myth and folklore to explore a more personal ideology formed from a precise theistic belief system and a personal history of significant life events (such as the birth of seven children, and the death of two). Yi-Fu Tuan argues that 'mythical space is [...] a response to feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs. [A cosmos] in mythical thought can have many centres' (99). For Ellis, this mythical centre of the cosmos is Wales.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Welsh Myth and Folklore in Anglophone Short Stories

### Introduction

Strangeness, fantasy, the unfamiliar, hallucination, myth, dream, memory, co-exist with the verifiable world, so that in many of the stories it feels as if one can have, simultaneously, more than one life. [...] Imaginative duplicity establishes two concurrent worlds, separate in real time and place, but drawn dramatically together through the obscure actions of the mind. (Lee *The Secret Self II* xii, xiii)

In a quotation which could equally apply to a discussion of Alice Thomas Ellis's novels, Hermione Lee, in discussing the short story form, argues that simultaneity is central to the genre and individual stories. The key difference lies in the 'imaginative duplicity' of the short story. For Ellis, there is no duplicity in the existence of a simultaneous second life as it is quantifiable according to her personal doctrine. However, according to Lee, short stories function to suggest simultaneity in order to evoke the possibility of a concurrent world rather than to state its existence as a lived fact. This accords with Elizabeth Bowen's analysis which argues that the 'short story is at an advantage over the novel, and can claim its nearer kinship to poetry, because it [is] more concentrated, [and] more visionary, and is not weighted down (as the novel is bound to be) by facts, explanation, or analysis' (*Afterthought* 77). Also implied here is that the short story is not 'less than the novel' (Beevers 21).

The following analysis of Anglophone short stories written by Welsh women identifies a thematic interest in national and gender identity as they have evolved through the twentieth century. I argue that they are increasingly forward-

looking, providing new modes of storytelling in anticipation of new modes of being in the second millennium. For these writers, Welsh myth and folklore are often the sites upon which such shifts intersect. These stories demonstrate elliptical, psychological, ambiguous narratives which draw together discrete yet concurrent worlds. They often do not manifest plot resolution and instead may pivot upon an epiphany. Adrian Hunter argues that ‘throughout the twentieth century we encounter the idea that the short story form is somehow specially amenable or adaptable to the representation of an increasingly fragmented social character [and] uncertainty’ (2). Writing in 2008, Ailsa Cox states that ‘the short story has never been in better [...] health [and is] proliferating (‘Introduction’ ix). The approach of the new millennium proved catalytic for the genre as short stories continued to be a popular mode through which writers could convey their perception of fragmentation pre- and post-2000, and this approach is also reflected in the Welsh short stories examined in this chapter.

From the early decades of the twentieth century, the Anglophone short story form has made a significant contribution to the literature of Wales. Glyn Jones suggests that such a proliferation of Anglophone Welsh writers in the early years of the century was the result of the Welsh Intermediate Schools Act (1889) which not only instructed a vast number of ‘education-loving Welsh’ (51) pupils in the English language, but also provided a readership for Anglophone writing. Raymond Garlick also notes this parallel growth of an Anglophone literature and its readership, stating: ‘their readers were the same kind of people as the writers’ (203). Furthermore, Jones also notes that short stories were ‘enjoying something of a vogue in England’ (G. Jones 52) in the 1930s and so Anglophone Welsh

writers found an outlet for their work. Short stories allowed an educated Anglophone Welsh writer to express their experiences of Wales, including social class, education, religion, and human relationships (G. Jones 53 – 55) in a publishing milieu of ‘interest and encouragement’ (G. Jones 53). Feminist scholars of Anglophone Welsh writing have flagged up gender bias in literature reviews of Anglophone Welsh fiction and edited anthologies of Anglophone Welsh short stories, such as those conducted by Glyn Jones, Raymond Garlick, and Gwyn Jones (among others).

Jane Aaron argues:

no woman writer has been presented by [Anglophone Welsh short story] anthologies as an indispensable contributor to the genre, and no acknowledged foundations have been laid for the development of a specifically female tradition in Welsh story-writing in English. But that tradition does exist (‘Introduction’ xv – xvi).

In an article on Dorothy Edwards, Claire Flay suggests that gender bias in Welsh literary criticism has led to an assumption that ‘writing by Welsh men is somehow truer of the Welsh experience than writing by Welsh women’ (120). In addition to this, I argue that Welsh women writers considered in this thesis are not only a part of the Welsh literary tradition of short story writing, but that when they interrogate Welsh myths and folk lore they also participate in a wider feminist tradition of recovering silenced mythic and folkloric voices.

Hermione Lee argues that the short story encapsulates conflict, particularly for women writers who have embraced and established the genre in which conflict arises between ‘secret visions and unwelcome realities, between personal desires and family restrictions, between consolatory dreams and hostile circumstances’

(*The Secret Self* xi). Clare Hanson states that ‘the short story seems to be the mode preferred by those writers who are not writing from within a fixed and stable cultural framework’ (*Short Stories* 12). Angela Carter’s short fictions, particularly *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), uncover hidden instabilities of fixed frameworks, where she ‘reproduces many of the disruptive narrative techniques [epitomised by the short story genre] with the same intention of unsettling [...] authority in the text’ (Hunter 128). But she is also recuperating the short story as a form from the ‘aesthetic and cultural pieties of high-modernism’ (Hunter 128). Carter reclaims short fiction as a mode of storytelling by recalling its oral and domestic origins, reinstating folklore and fairy tales to their former prominence (Hunter 127). She embraces and reconstitutes Modernist agendas which established and authorised short fictions at the start of the twentieth century.

Hunter refers to James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) which crystallized developing trends in Modernist short stories; that is, the ‘‘epiphany’ standing in place of the conventional resolution of plot, and the scrupulously mean style producing an indirect, elliptical and ambiguous narrative discourse’ (44). Forrest Ingram similarly holds Joyce’s *Dubliners* as exemplary (21) of the Modernist short story. Through the post-modern era (1930 to 1980) Modernist strategies were still at the centre of the genre’s evolution as writers continued its transfiguration (Hunter 96). As noted by Glyn Jones, Anglophone Welsh writers were also actively participating in this evolution.

Supernaturalism and the fantastic are central to the Anglophone Welsh short stories examined in this chapter, with Welsh women writers iterating

fantastical motifs which have accrued to the short story form and its generic conventions. Welsh Annwn haunts the verified reality of the human world, but because both worlds exist simultaneously, humans also breach boundaries between worlds, becoming the haunting presence in Annwn. Discussing the cultural origins of ghost stories, Andrew Smith argues that a ghost ‘displaces cultural narratives about identity and so enables a re-evaluation of those constructions’ (4). Therefore, Welsh women writers who evoke humans as haunting entities within Annwn re-evaluate constructions of identity, forcing a revision of who haunts who. This accords with Mary Pratt’s analysis of the short story form, in which she states that ‘just as it is used for formal experimentation, the short story is used to introduce new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters into the literary scene’ (187).

Nadine Gordimer contrasts fantasy in novels to short fiction, stating: ‘fantasy, in the hands of the short story writers is so much more successful than when in the hands of novelists because it is necessary for it to hold good only for the brief illumination of the situation it dominates’ (170). In addition to being attracted to short story forms and supernatural writing, Susan Williams argues that: ‘fantasy is ideal [...] for any exploration of the construction of gender’ (xi). Clare Hanson insists that ‘the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle of expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women’ (‘Introduction’ *Re-reading* 3). Additionally, Katherine Weese suggests that ‘the fantastic [...] provides a valuable framework for illuminating feminist narrative praxis’ (3).

In their analysis of ethnicity and gender in short stories by American women, Corinne H. Dale and J.H.E. Paine argue that ‘neither gender nor ethnicity can legitimately be considered alone’ (vii). They also state that many of the short stories they examine demonstrate ‘individual empowerment as a writer articulating a personal voice [as an] individually created Self – not that of a socially constructed Other’ (Dale and Paine ix). Here then, it is argued that the short story is a site upon which fantasy, women’s writing, postcolonialism and ethnicity intersect. I argue that this holds true for the selection of Welsh women’s writing which explores gender in nationhood through engagements with myth and folklore, and presents such engagements through (often fantastic) short narratives.

In his introduction to his edited collection of *Welsh Tales of Terror* (1973), R. Chetwynd-Hayes writes that Wales is ‘rich in folk-lore and has more than its fair share of ghosts – in fact, so far as I can see, one cannot walk down a country lane after sunset without encountering a headless horseman or a pack of hell-hounds on the rampage’ (9). Within Anglophone short stories by Welsh women writers, the Welsh mythic past is never truly in the past. Wales is presented as a liminal site continuously connected to a supernatural existence. For Alice Thomas Ellis there is, in Wales, a ‘veil between this mode of existence and another’ (*Wales Anthology* xiv) and this veil is identified, acknowledged and lifted within the short fictions to be explored in the following discussion. Within the short stories selected for analysis, Welsh time is presented as non-linear and is instead cyclical or helicoid. Welsh landscapes are spaces mapped ‘within a mythical framework’ (Jarvis 107) and ‘rendered as conceptual pattern’ (Jarvis 108). Welsh rivers, mountains, seascapes, valleys, and woodland are figured as crossing-places

between a tangible material world of humans and that of a Welsh Underworld – Annwn. Within these short stories, both worlds exist in parallel, with either world able to rupture through into the other.

This chapter identifies a shift in the usage of source material over the century, from Welsh folkloric sources to Welsh mythic sources. Within the short stories appearing between 1912 and 1979, the crossover between Annwn and the human world is presented in specifically folkloric terms with Welsh fairies and humans crossing paths and worlds – with negative and positive outcomes for either side. Tensions between indigenous cultures and incomer influence are explored by emphasising Wales as a liminal space, where intercrossing, haunting, spectral entities, and invisible watchers are present in both Annwn and the human world. Within all the stories analysed in this section there is an implicit warning to humans who do not respect Annwn, or who unwarily engage with Annwn, resulting in their own downfall or demise.

In the new millennium, between 2001 and 2009, there is a shift in focus as Welsh women short story writers turn to an overtly mythic mode which draws upon the Welsh myth cycle of *The Mabinogi*. In these short stories latent themes of transformation explore notions of gender and national identity in the years of nascent devolution. In this period Welsh mythic goddesses appear anew, existing in new contexts, in new socio-historic settings, and in new generations of Welsh humanity. At a time of shifts in national politics and their impact on identity in the new order, a mythic past is recalled – but this time mythic women are centrally located in the new politico-cultural landscape.



The short stories offered for analysis in this chapter often acknowledge the significance of a coherent 'nationhood and the way in which this has been concomitant with the construction of mythical, idealised pasts' (Peach 16). However, they do not look back to an idealised mythic past, but instead, look forward to a mythic future exploring processes and functions of mythopoeia. This recalls Bowen's assertion that short fiction is 'more visionary' (77) as well as Pratt's analysis in which she states: 'just as it is used for formal experimentation, the short story is used to introduce new [...] subject matters' (187). Welsh myth tales are presented as the most appropriate mode for reflecting on, making sense of, and expressing times of significant socio-historical and politico-cultural changes, in addition to commenting on what these changes may mean for gender and national identity in generations to come.

The earliest of the stories to be discussed is Bertha Thomas's 'The Castle of Sleep' (1912) which presents a traveller who underestimates the significance of castle ruins in which he chooses to sleep, whilst Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'Visitors to a Castle' (1979) recounts, in a realist mode, life in a Welsh Elfin court. Despite appearing nearly a century apart, both stories present comments on colonisation using the Welsh Underworld, referred to as 'Annwn', as a narrative mode. Bertha Thomas's 'The Only Girl' (1912) and Dorothy K. Haynes's 'Mrs Jones' (1973) both present changeling children as *genius loci*, and demonstrate how the Tylwyth Teg punish disrespectful humans. Ellen Lloyd-Williams's 'The Call of the River' (1924), Margiad Evans's 'The Black House' (1939) and 'The Old Woman and the Wind' (1948), and Hazel F. Looker's 'The Lost Gold Mine' (1973) explore the concept of 'be careful what you wish for' when engaging with

Welsh Annwn; there can be no foretelling of potential negative consequences once a human has encouraged Welsh supernatural forces to enter into their life. In each case, where there is a warning against meddling with metaphysical forces beyond human cognition and control, there is also an implied acknowledgement of the real existence of such forces, an acknowledgement reminiscent of Alice Thomas Ellis's belief in a continuous existence of parallel mystical worlds.

In the new millennium, Catherine Merriman's 'Painting Juliet' (2001) and Imogen Rhia Herrad's 'Bronwerdd' (2002) engage with the notions of transformation at the core of their source material, that is the Blodeuwedd myth tale. Kate D'Lima's 'Branwen' (2008) and Herrad's 'Rhiannon's Bird' (2010) draw on *The Mabinogi's* mythic queens and their association with birds. In these redactions, birds help female protagonists to escape from abusive situations.

These stories demonstrate a shift from folklore to myth, suggesting Welsh mythic source narratives provide an alternative space from which to interrogate notions of identity, allowing an exploration of literal and metaphorical transformations. In these stories which engage with *The Mabinogi*, there is an insistence on transformation signalling empowerment. Glenda Beagan's 'Yellow Archangel' (2010) is set in a post-apocalyptic world and explores how storytelling instigates a beatification; a young girl is revered for surviving a viral plague and is worshipped thereafter. In this new world there is a potential to re-make the old stories, to look towards newly forged identities – the future is not yet written. Regardless of whether the Welsh women writers of short fiction selected for analysis here have engaged with Welsh myth or folklore, they all draw on these source materials in order to explore notions of national and gender identity.

### Welsh Fairy and Folk Lore Intertexts

In Bertha Thomas's 'The Castle of Sleep' (1912) and Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'Visitors to a Castle' (1979), humanity is presented as a haunting presence within Annwn. Annwn, a real world accessed through liminal spaces, is intruded upon by humans who appear as spectres in this parallel existence. In 'The Castle of Sleep' an unwary English traveller to West Wales settles to sleep in the ruins of a castle after becoming lost by day. As Alan Johns sleeps he dreams of the castle newly constructed at the zenith of its power and activity. However, this is no ordinary dream for when he awakens he does not do so from a 'natural slumber, but as a man who has been thrown into an artificially produced trance' (B. Thomas 'Castle' 173). He is figured as an outsider to Wales, but also as an outsider to the life of the castle which, it seems, continues to exist through time and space. He has been cast into a trance from which he is able to view this parallel life. Before his slumber he had ruminated upon the loss of the castle's proper name: 'its origin and early history [...] are lost, irrevocably, as the hues of the rainbow' (B. Thomas 'Castle' 156). But its past is not past, it is continuing beyond the realms of human perception; this becomes significant when measured against Alan's thoughts of early twentieth-century European imperialism, Empire, dominion and the tensions between legitimate and illegitimate powers (B. Thomas 'Castle' 155).

The castle was built as a medieval English coloniser's fortress in which an English Lord married a Welsh Princess in a political act of unity between nations. Alan's trance shows him past and continued colonial tensions, tensions further complicated by Bertha Thomas who uses the female body as a site upon which these struggles are played out. In this way, Thomas presents nation-as-woman, a

trope popular within Victorian Welsh women's writing (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 72) as noted by Jo Furber (139), Stephen Knight (19), Linden Peach (16) and Jane Aaron ('Finding a Voice' 189). In Thomas's story the Welsh Princess, Olwen (a name taken from *The Mabinogion*), loves a Welsh bard who is both powerless and penniless, but she is married to a powerful English overlord; there is a racialised love-triangle which foreshadows Margiad Evans's *Country Dance* (1932). There is a parallelism at work with the colonial tensions of medieval Wales being echoed by contemporary European tensions at the dawn of World War I. Alan Johns questions his perceptions, asking, 'Can this be? Is it folly or latent insight in us that craves and calls for *some* remaining essence, some haunting emanation?' (B. Thomas 'Castle' 156). Welsh Annwn is drawn upon to acknowledge the complexities of colonial relationships and imbalances of power; such imbalances haunt the ancient landscapes of Wales just as they haunt his present-day Europe. This palimpsest can be glimpsed through a 'latent insight' only possible in the liminal spaces of Wales.

In Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'Visitors to a Castle' (1970) oblique colonial themes are woven within parallel worlds of Annwn and humanity. In this short story the Tylwyth Teg live in an ash tree grove in West Wales, in Mynydd Prescelly, and endure the meddling of humans. There are two significant meddlers: the first being a Saint who aggravates the fairies by introducing them to the idea of faith, 'but Faith was not for them. Being Elfins, they had no souls. Without souls, they could not enjoy the advantages of Faith [...]. Till now, they had listened politely. But at this last statement their Welsh pride put up its hackle' (S.T. Warner 93). The Saint tells them that without Faith, they could not move

mountains; because of the strength of their ‘Welsh pride’, they take this as a challenge. They decide to try to move Mynydd Prescelly and do so – through collective will-power concentrated via communal singing, in which ‘each sang, putting his whole heart into it as though everything depended on him’ (S.T. Warner 95). The next morning ‘the mountain was gone. When they flew up to see what had happened to it, they saw the distant coastline and the mysterious pallor of the sea’ (S.T. Warner 95). Three nights later, the mountain returns ‘of its own will’ (S.T. Warner 95). Here then, a Saint queries the will-power of the Tylwyth Teg causing them to cohere as a community and express their sense of belonging in new ways. As an outsider to Annwn he challenges them and their sense of pride answers that challenge, so much so, that their disappearing of Mynydd Prescelly becomes ‘a regular ceremonial’ (S.T. Warner 96).

However, the Elfins’ interaction with humans is also negative, as when the second woman meddler, a midwife in the twentieth century, is invited to Castle Ash Grove after a bicycle accident within its vicinity. As a midwife, with medical science training and resources, the young woman pragmatically ministers to her own cuts using disinfectants from her medical kit. She does not read any symbolic meaning into her spilled blood, viewing it as a mere inconvenience. For the Tylwyth Teg ‘hospitality is a sacred duty [but] a mortal who delighted in the sight of blood was not the guest they would have chosen’ (S.T. Warner 98). Driven from their home by the disinfectant’s stench the fairies holiday on Mynydd Prescelly, but one fairy is particularly disturbed by the presence of the midwife and her science. Dame Bronwen recounts to Queen Morgan Spider how, on seeing the spilled blood, ‘I saw trees blighted and grass burned brown and birds falling

out of the sky. I saw the end of our world, Morgan – the end of Elfin. I saw the last fairy dying like a scorched insect’ (S.T. Warner 102). At the sight of human blood and disinfectant forged through scientific experimentation, the fairy dame receives a vision as a harbinger of the fairies’ demise.

The midwife who has negatively influenced the fairies by forcing them from their home, signals their demise in an apocalyptic prophecy. Religious piety (S.T. Warner 96), engendered by the Saint’s preaching, is an initial threat to the supernatural Tylwyth Teg, but they assimilate the powers represented by the Saint, using them and integrating them into their own culture and identity. Advances in science indicate humanity’s shrinking belief in the metaphysical and this cannot be reconciled by the fairies. This second encounter with a human incomer ruptures their indigenous world in a manner suggesting irrecoverable damage.

Metaphysical Wales appears vengeful in stories by Bertha Thomas and Dorothy K. Haynes. Both present changeling children as *genius loci* of their community. These children are associated with the Tylwyth Teg as they represent the spirit of their home, local landscape and community. As apparent changelings they embody a liminality which allows linkage between human and fairy worlds. They perceive what humans cannot. Thomas and Haynes draw upon traditions of changelings as *genius loci* to comment upon how humanity is diminished when liminal links are broken. This treatment accords with Hilda Vaughan’s engagement with changeling folklore. As with Vaughan, the changelings are positively presented and are not devilish goblins (Sikes 61); accordingly the source tales are recuperated. However, like Alice Thomas Ellis’s engagement with

the Tylwyth Teg, the Welsh fairies often punish disrespectful humans by withdrawing their benevolence and by castigating a prideful woman.

Set in the opening years of the twentieth century, 'The Only Girl' (1912) by Bertha Thomas sketches the decline of Glascarreg farm. The nameless first person narrator accounts for its demise as caused by the death of Catrin Jones, the only daughter of the farming family, and the 'Only Girl' of the story's title. Catrin dies after a succession of apparent epileptic seizures. The narrator states: 'It had not taken them three weeks to discover that Catrin had been the mainstay of the family prosperity, and that without her the whole fabric of their farm life would come tumbling round their ears' (B. Thomas 'Only' 34). Catrin's input and influence are so integral to the workings of the farm that after her death the family give it up and 'with their substantial savings they removed to a villa on the town skirts [...] yet to them a poor exchange for the old homestead, where their hearts remain' (B. Thomas 'Only' 34). However, the only girl's relationship to the homestead seemingly runs deeper than it at first appears.

In accordance with Elaine Showalter's concept of women's wild zone and Jane Aaron's analysis of such a concept in relation to Welsh women's writing, Catrin can be read as entirely ex-centric as a woman, as Welsh and as a valetudinarian. Aaron asserts that in short stories by Welsh women: 'Wales too [...] is itself imaged as a social outsider. It is figured as a dispossessed anarchic country, closer to nature than to culture, wild because it has not yet arrived at adult accountability and self-responsibility' ('Introduction' xii). Drawing on woman-as-nation critical theory (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 72 *et al*), Catrin Jones may be similarly described. In this respect, Catrin is comparable to Ellis's

Angharad in *Unexplained Laughter*; Catrin like Angharad is also a *genius loci* and her arcane knowledge and superstitions directly correspond to her otherness.

Her changeling nature is suggested through her belief in the totemic transference of human souls into animal bodies and so she abhors the killing of wild animals and ‘she would never knit in a field – witches would tangle the yarn. She urged the choosing of cows with a white stripe down the back’ (B. Thomas ‘Only’ 30). Catrin grows particularly disturbed after chancing upon a death portent: ‘She shook her head unhappily [...] what she had seen was one of the Cwn Annwn, or the spectral hounds that appear on the threshold when an inmate is threatened with death. It was white, with fiery eyes, and melted away at her approach’ (B. Thomas ‘Only’ 32). This alterity attributed to her changeling qualities suggests that not only is Catrin attuned to Welsh nature, but that by drawing on changeling folklore, Bertha Thomas is also endorsing the tradition as a ‘protean mold for intellectual otherness’ (Goodey and Stainton 239) and as a way of ‘proving the real presence of the [Underworld]’ (Goodey and Stainton 231). Annwn, alterity and Welsh nature are merged in the *genius loci* of Glascarreg farm. In ‘The Only Girl’, storytelling, the Welsh Annwn, Wales, a Welsh *genius loci* (or intercessor between spirit and human realms) and childlike innocence become symbolically entwined, and when this symbolic bond is ruptured, it cannot be healed and Wales, consequently, is diminished.

‘Mrs Jones’ (1973) by Dorothy K. Haynes recounts how the proud Mrs Jones refuses to share a Welsh cake destined to be entered in a community baking competition. The child narrator, Dylis, witnesses how rudely Mrs Jones denies the simple request from the woman who was ‘small, only the size of a child. She



looked as if she hadn't had a good meal for a week. Her legs were thin and marled as if they were cold, and her hair all straggled on her shoulders' (Haynes 121). This diminutive woman is a Welsh fairy testing the benevolence of Mrs Jones, who fails the test by refusing to share the cake, stating, 'I don't bake for the likes of you' (Haynes 121). The fairy's expression altered to show 'hurt in her face; then the hurt changed to venom, a queer cruel look' (Haynes 122). Dylis is the last person to see Mrs Jones who disappears after this exchange with the Tylwyth Teg. Two years later, Dylis and Gwen (her sister) venture onto the Gower's sands and explore its dunes and rock-pools; there they discover Mrs Jones, held captive in a kitchen encased in a cliff. The fairies force her to bake and will not release her until her flour has run out – but it is magically replaced. It is a form of riddle as she does not realise that if she were to use up her 'dusting flour' (Haynes 125) she would be finished, but she has to solve that puzzle herself.

Gwen, like Thomas's Catrin and Ellis's Angharad, is othered through being described as 'not quite the full shilling' (Haynes 121): she mutters to herself and is prone to 'start[ing] nonsense' (Haynes 123). She has an affinity with running water but her family limit her contact with it, 'because they say in time it makes even a sensible person queer' (Haynes 122). It is Dylis, however, who perceives the presence of the Welsh fairies at the beach, and Dylis who is sensitive to nature's portents, noting how there was a peculiar light on the Gower beach at that particular moment when they find Mrs Jones (Haynes 122), how the shingle was dry, white and brittle, like broken bones and 'there was a mewling and whining of seabirds, and the fan of wings in our faces. [...] I felt that we ought to go; and then, high over my head, I thought I heard a voice calling. 'It's only the

gulls,' I thought; but the voice was human, terribly weary and hopeless' (Haynes 123). Both girls are presented as symbolically and metaphysically attuned to the landscape of Wales, and to the Welsh numinous. Gwen and Dylis are the only ones able to cross the liminal divide and witness the fate of Mrs Jones.

In Thomas's 'The Only Girl' and Haynes's 'Mrs Jones', young Welsh women are presented as *genius loci* or are attuned to its presence, specifically in relation to Wales's liminality. It is Catrin, Gwen and Dylis who recognise the continued presence of the Tylwyth Teg in Wales. Both stories demonstrate how there are negative consequences for the individual and the wider community when that liminality is made light of and when entities from the Welsh Underworld, who continue to exist and interact with humans, are disrespected.

This is further mirrored in short fictions which explore the consequences of becoming too familiar with Welsh Annwn. Whilst Ellen Lloyd-Williams's 'The Call of the River' (1924), Margiad Evans's 'The Black House' (1939) and 'The Old Woman and the Wind' (1948), and Hazel F. Looker's 'The Lost Gold Mine' (1973) do not present narratives which show Annwn being disrespected, they do present the consequences of not fully appreciating the potency of Welsh Annwn. There can be no foretelling of the potential negative consequences once a human has encouraged Welsh supernatural forces to enter into their life. Consequently that human is often ill-prepared for the impact of the numinous.

In Ellen Lloyd-Williams's 'The Call of the River', children, childlike adults, ex-centric Others, oral tale-telling traditions, Wales and its folklore are again metonymically woven throughout a short story by a woman from Wales. The story opens with a description of John Evans Ty Bach, 'a little dark, spare

man with high cheekbones, and eyes not black, but a clear deep brown, like turf-pools in sunshine. He was a man of no fixed trade [...] a farrier on occasion, the beasts trusted him as they trust few men' (Lloyd-Williams 90). Lloyd-Williams's depiction of John as *genius loci* is ratified in his storytelling abilities. John discourses upon the local folk and fairy lore; he narrates the continued presence of the Tylwyth Teg and the Coblynau (mine fairies). His storytelling draws children to him, and he similarly draws their trust just as he does that of animals:

It was with children as with the dumb creatures, for they would flock around him wherever he went, to hear his tales of the days when the Fair Folk came to buy in Carmarthen market, or when the miner in his narrow alley underground would pause a moment, to hear the tap-tap-tap of goblin hammers beyond the narrow wall that hemmed him in. Or he would point to the Pwca's lantern hovering at night above the deep waters of the bog, or hold up a silencing hand as he listened for elfin music on the edge of rings trodden green up upon the hill-side. (Lloyd-Williams 90)

Like Catrin Jones, he has embraced what he perceives to be the spirits of Wales, the Annwn, the Tylwyth Teg, the Pwcas of the bogs, the Coblynau of the bowels of the land, the elfin music carried on the very air.

As a *genius loci* he 'was born of a Midsummer Night with the moon at the full' (Lloyd-Williams 90) and in terms of his standing in the local Welsh community, 'he was a queer soul, with eyes that saw more than those of other folk' (Lloyd-Williams 90). Ellen Lloyd-Williams alters the gender of the *genius loci* to make the character male. But the clue to the motivation for this may lie in its source tale; that is, the tales of the Water Fairy Bride and her Human Bridegroom. This trope underpins Hilda Vaughan's novel *Iron and Gold*, and is a popular motif in the folk and fairy lore of Wales and can be found in not

dissimilar forms in other cultures, such as the Scottish, Irish and Finnish selkie narratives (Wood 'The Fairy Bride' 56).

John Ty Bach is betrothed to the daughter of a fairly wealthy local landowner but it becomes clear, to the narrator at least, that John's heart belongs to another, and that his true love is in fact a water fairy. These Gwragedd Annwn are 'the elfin dames who dwell under water' (Sikes 34), not in the sea but in rivers and lakes inland (Sikes 34). Hilda Vaughan has her water fairy, Glythin, leave her watery abode to join Owain, her human love – the novel charts the spiritual maturation of Owain as he must live by the specific conditions set by Glythin and her kin. Here, John is the human bridegroom but he must acquiesce to his lover's refusal to join him in the mortal world.

On the eve of his engagement to the daughter of Blaenpant, John attempts to cajole his sweetheart from the river for the last time. The narrator (again) eavesdrops upon the communication that crosses between the mortal and numinous realms.

'It is good-bye, then,' he said. 'O, my dear, my dear. Goodbye, since you will not come to the warm fireside and the living hearts of men. And I must go away – away from the sound of your silver voice and the rippling fall of your laughter, and the sight of your deep dark eyes and your smile alight in the sunshine...Oh, I cannot leave you behind me – come out of your world to mine!' But the river rippled on with a sound like a woman's tears. (Lloyd-Williams 92)

Like Owain in Hilda Vaughan's *Iron and Gold*, John joins his beloved water-fairy in her element. Through the fairy's refusal to leave Annwn, it is suggested that she recognises the problems posed by entering into a mixed-race marriage in the human realm. Notions of ownership and concession/sacrifice within marriage are

questioned when the fairy lays down terms for the mixed-race relationship; John agrees to meet them even if it means subsuming himself in Annwn:

There was a sudden blast of wind that seemed to shake the house. The door swung wide open; the house was filled with the echo of swirling water, and above and through it something that seemed a call, high, penetrating, sweet, imperious. And, as if in answer to a summons that he understood, John rose abruptly and stepped out into the night. The door crashed to behind him. (Lloyd-Williams 93)

As a *genius loci* John Ty Bach literally becomes part of the landscape of Wales; he is subsumed not only into the waterway, but also into the Welsh folklore that is to be passed on through the local oral storytelling tradition.

Margiad Evans's 'The Black House' (1939) and 'The Old Woman and the Wind' (1948), present Wales as a threshold through which natural and supernatural forces may cross at the behest of humans, a concept particularly striking when Margiad Evans positions herself as a border writer, stating 'I am the *Border*' (qtd. in Lloyd-Morgan 32). The Black House is a 'sinister squint' (M. Evans, 'The Black' 242) of an inn presided over by Flinty Knuckles, a supposed witch who 'did a regular trade straight from hell to hand' (M. Evans, 'The Black' 242). One evening a stranger enters the tavern and wagers that he possesses true magic, and so challenges the local blacksmith, Tom, to participate in a demonstration of this power. It is not a power derived of Annwn, but one of Judeo-Christian paradigms which conjure Satan rather than the Tylwyth Teg. Tom is tied to a chair and lights are extinguished as the stranger performs a summoning spell, which seems to work. "I smell hell," a man uttered, and in the confused moment before they managed to light the lamp the mass of them could be felt

palpitating in the denned madness of fear. [...] The air was black with terror and primitive rage' (M. Evans, 'The Black' 245). Within this Welsh tavern Satan is evoked, to the horror of Tom as 'he saw sidelong and over his shoulder, a thing resting – an indescribable thing – a thing like a cloven hoof' (M. Evans, 'The Black' 246). For causing such a terror, the stranger is violently ejected from the tavern only to be followed by his demonic doppelgänger, whose 'eyes [...] in some preternatural way seemed to be the stranger's, and which glistened with all the evil hunger of all human and bestial life' (M. Evans, 'The Black' 246). Here then, Wales as a liminal border space between natural and preternatural worlds is brought into focus. Reminding us of Ellis's engagement with Welsh mysticism, there is a thin divide between worlds where Wales is figured as an open threshold. Once that threshold is crossed the consequences cannot be guessed at or measured – the stranger's success in summoning a diabolical entity nearly kills Tom.

'The Old Woman and the Wind' relates how old Mrs Ashstone, who lives high on a hillside, struggles with tempestuous winds which daily batter her cottage. One night she hears a voice in the wind – the wind itself begins to speak to her, saying 'I'm the wind. And you're a witch.' [...] The wind laughed and the sound was like stones leaping in a quarry' (M. Evans, 'The Old' 228, 229). It appears to her as a 'low black toadstool of a cloud' (M. Evans, 'The Old' 229) which frightens her, and so she sends it away to aggravate her neighbours in the valley who do not usually, in their lower setting, suffer its torments (M. Evans, 'The Old' 229). The next morning Mrs Ashstone finds that the wind has all but destroyed the village and she realises that she must make peace with it and suffer its extreme forces for the sake of the valley dwellers. Upon her approach to her

cottage, after surveying the damage, ‘under the oak she stumbled over the wind as if it had been a dog asleep. It circled around her, blowing a wren out of a bush. [...] ‘It can’t happen again,’ said the wind. ‘Nor do I want it should,’ said she’ (M. Evans ‘The Old’ 234). Due to her close proximity to the wind, Mrs Ashstone, experiencing its extreme forces daily, becomes attuned to it, so much so that she learns that Welsh nature possesses the same sagacity and loyalty as a household pet; the wind becomes her friend, nearer than a relation (M. Evans, ‘The Old’ 234). She will not send the wind away again. Mrs Ashstone traverses a Welsh liminal divide as she becomes witch-like in her developing affinity with Welsh nature. However, she also discovers that Welsh nature’s power should never be underestimated.

Parallels can be drawn between Hazel F. Looker’s ‘The Lost Gold Mine’ (1973) and Bertha Thomas’s ‘The Castle of Sleep’; in both, Welsh Annwn exists and humans may venture, or stumble, through a liminal space into that supernatural realm. Thomas’s Alan Johns is a passive witness to the Welsh courtiers in West Wales, but Tim Westgate in Looker’s story actively seeks Annwn whilst underestimating its puissance. Tim is told of a local gold mine whilst on a trekking holiday in Tresaint, a mine long closed and haunted by pit ponies who are said to re-trace their steps through villages, up mountains and into the mine’s adit. Tim is infected by gold fever ‘which drives a man on until he finds gold or dies in the attempt’ (Looker 110) and so determines to find the gold mine. Sunset forces him to return to the village, but as he enters the darkened village he hears

a soft padding, then a clip-clop, followed by a rattle of harness. [...] The ponies came out from nowhere. First the head, then the shoulders, finally a complete pony emerged from a position roughly in the centre of the lane; it was as though it had come through an invisible curtain. (Looker 116, 117)

Tim wonders if the preternatural ponies, who cast no shadow, could lead him to the gold mine and thus reveal an untapped seam of gold, gifting him immense wealth and power. As he follows the ponies, he becomes entrapped firstly in undergrowth as though ‘there was an active force trying to hold him back’ (Looker 117) and then in a bog. Its sucking sounds like ‘evil chuckles’ which arouse in him a ‘terror-inspired rage’ (Looker 118, 118). He is rescued by his friends just as the bog reaches his arm-pits. He learns his lesson; he is no longer suffering from gold fever, stating, ‘Not now [...] not now’ (Looker 119). Tim Westgate underestimates Annwn and its threat to unwary humans. The pit-ponies are immune to the bog and walk over it as if it was solid ground (Looker 118) knowing that their mine entrance lies underneath it. They do not alert Tim to the existence of the mire as they are oblivious of him. They walk on in their set path, ‘trudging sedately’ (Looker 118) whilst Tim, who has not anticipated any negative consequences of engaging with Welsh Annwn, nearly dies for his lack of caution and foresight.

As folkloric tales, the stories presented for analysis so far often share a common trope in keeping with a primary function of all fairy and folk tales; they are didactic. For Orenstein, folk tales are ‘inevitably [...] a vehicle for imparting [...] ethics in keeping with the social fabric of the times’ (4). Each short story has drawn on Welsh Annwn to present a form of morality tale. Mrs Jones and Tim Westgate are arrogant, rude, selfish, and greedy whilst Mrs Ashstone does not



exhibit neighbourliness – they are all punished. Dame Bronwen and Catrin represent colonial comments on the dangers of dismissing indigenous races whilst princess Olwen’s love triangle indicates an authorial comment on the complexities of mixed-race or exogamous marriage. These short fictions demonstrate how Annwn and the human realm exist in parallel or are interconnected by occupying the same time/space. Consequences of human and fairy folk contact can be either negative or positive, but the overall dicta suggests that a positive contact depends upon humans respecting Annwn: they should not underestimate the extent to which Annwn may disrupt, threaten or even destroy.

### Mythic Goddesses: Blodeuwedd

Both Catherine Merriman’s short story ‘Painting Juliet’ (2001) and Imogen Rhia Herrad’s ‘Bronwerdd’ (2002) focus on transformations which are physical, or tangible. This theme can be traced forward to Gwyneth Lewis’s *The Meat Tree* (2010), discussed in chapter six, in which transformation is key to a reading of both the source tale and the revision of it. Merriman’s and Herrad’s stories explore processes through which women are subjected to transformation. Narratorial perspectives lie with those who are responsible for transforming women. Both stories engage with the central topoi of transformation in the source tale, but both also present humans being turned (literally and figuratively) into flowers/plant-life.

In Merriman’s ‘Painting Juliet’ a middle-aged male visual artist ponders the creative process as he paints a portrait of his lover Juliet, a portrait which

provides an artistic transformation of her. He typically paints still-life, usually plants and flowers and has hitherto resisted Juliet's repeated requests for him to turn his artistic attention to her. The story, told in first person, delineates (for the most part) the negotiation between Juliet and the painter after which the painter acquiesces to her demands. Through reported speech the painter reveals his subconscious perceptions of women, and the general paradigmatic power structures that inform the relationship between the genders.

The artist narrator allays the psychological discomfort he feels when he is coerced into painting Juliet's portrait by incorporating his natural instincts into the picture, instincts that have hitherto directed him to paint flora. He does paint Juliet, but he paints her as a flower, representing a transformation of her physical form from flesh to flowers. This directly reverses the source myth which takes silent, non-cognizant flowers and gives them cognizance and voice by transforming them into a human woman.

This finds a parallel in Herrad's story and in Lewis's *The Meat Tree*. Here, then, Catherine Merriman utilises *The Mabinogi* and its tale of Blodeuwedd and Lleu, to explore the process of creation; specifically the concept of a male who garners creative energy in order to create a female from flowers. And the source of this impulse is not lost on the artist either and thus the portrait, and the narrator's comments upon it, make the story metafictional. Naming the portrait, the artist says:

My Woman of Flowers. The original, if you remember your folk tales, was a lady specially created to partner some poor sod cursed never to have a

mortal wife. She was unfaithful to him and in the end conspired to kill him. Well yes. Women aren't floral Lego. (Merriman 39)

Through the artist, Merriman suggests that the potential for men to subject and silence women is present in every individual male whether they are willing or able to admit to it or not.

The painter's reservations might be elucidated by recalling Atwood's discussion of gendered fear (*Second Words* 413): men fear women's ridicule. When he is finished, the painter attempts to reduce the risk of ridicule by placing conditions on Juliet's critical voice thus silencing her. He says: 'First, no looking till it's finished. Nod nod nod. She expected that. [...] Second: no enquiries over progress. [...] Third and last – no demands for explanation when it's over. The picture must be enough' (Merriman 36). And just like Blodeuwedd in the *The Mabinogi*, Juliet must not question why she has been so transformed, nor must she question her creator as to any aspect of his perception and impression of her. The male's artistic creation of women suits his own preferences; it is everything, and it is final.

Imogen Rhia Herrad's 'Bronwerdd' also draws upon the Welsh myth tale of Lleu and Blodeuwedd. The narrative perspective, as in the original myth tale, does not lie with Bronwerdd herself. Herrad's short story reflects its source tale in so far as the narrative perspective remains with the creator, who is the vegetarian Head Chef of a vegetarian restaurant. Although not a conjurer whose magic creates beings from meadowsweet, oak and broom, the narrator is an inventor of fine cuisine; drawing upon creative skills s/he is able to conceive of innovative plant, vegetable and fruit based dishes. However, there is one vital difference from

the myth tale – Herrad’s conjurer, whose gender is not stated, exhibits a vague sense of responsibility and guilty unease that are directly attributed to the act of creating Bronwerdd (‘green breast’ in English).

The narrative begins with an overt statement of regretting past actions that, now they have been done, cannot be undone:

I think I may have made a mistake.

She is looking at me oddly, and she has been asking me some strange questions.

Maybe it would have been better if I hadn’t done it, I can see that; but there’s not much I can do now.

She’s gone out. I don’t know where she is. The house is chilly and silent.

I don’t think I knew what I was doing at the time and I wouldn’t have ever thought that it would come off. I think I must have been a bit drunk, on the wine and the summer heat and the moon. (Herrad, ‘Bronwerdd’ 84)

A direct reference to the Blodeuwedd myth suggests that the narrator has a prior knowledge of the Welsh tale. The chef declares ‘I made myself a fair maiden, out of vegetables and fruit, not flowers. I made a spinach woman to be my friend and my companion and my only love’ (Herrad, ‘Bronwerdd’ 85). Here the distinction drawn between vegetables and flowers implies that the chef is aware of the difference between the crafting of Bronwerdd and Blodeuwedd. However, the chef still chooses a leafy vegetable which bears flowers. Spinach itself intersects across flora/vegetable definitions as it is a leafy, flowering vegetable which reproduces via seedlings, but has specific nutritional benefits for human blood and bone when cooked and consumed. This leafy vegetable is a hybrid in all its manifestations and is therefore suited to the chef’s transformation of vegetation into a woman, in accord with *The Mabinogi*’s source tale.

Desire for transformation lies at the heart of Herrad's narrative; it is this yearning that is used by the narrator to justify the creation of a vegetable fair maiden; as s/he states, 'I'd been longing for a companion. Well, not *longing*. Wishing' (Herrad 'Bronwerdd' 84). As in the source myth tale the urge to create is for selfish reasons, to satisfy personal longing; there is no thought given to the created being until afterwards, when that being decides to act independently and begins to oppose its creator. This brings to mind Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Victor's 'breathless horror and disgust [...] unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created' (61). In Herrad's tale the first warning of growing unease (rather than horror) occurs in the opening lines of the narrative when Bronwerdd has left the house. The chef comments: 'She's gone out. I don't know where she is' (Herrad 'Bronwerdd' 84). Like Merriman's painter, the chef is subconsciously wary of his subject, but Herrad extends this wariness by having Bronwerdd herself initiate a transformation of the chef from meat to plant.

In Herrad's tale the transformation motif subtly shifts in a number of ways. In creating a vegetable-woman from ingredients found in the garden's vegetable plot, the source tale moves from the mythic to the domestic realm and so it is de-romanticised. This shift traces a wider trajectory of women's revisionist engagement with myth. Revisions might dismantle the prestige of myth tales by relocating mythic narratives into mundane contexts, such as Woolf's intertextual weaving of Classical myth through her novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Further examples of how Herrad's tale reworks *The Mabinogi* include how Bronwerdd is made of vegetables (not flowers) and how Bronwerdd poisons her creator thus instigating his/her transformation/destruction. Unlike Blodeuwedd who is turned

into an owl, Bronwerdd is not punished for this destruction. Instead it is Bronwerdd who is punishing her creator. She becomes a creator in her own right, turning a human made of meat into a being made of vegetable matter.

Bronwerdd's act of self-government is manifest through her apparently transforming her creator over a matter of weeks, using charmed powders. The narrator notices:

there is a patch of newly dug, dark, moist soil on the garden. The air is filled with the heady scent of fresh earth. I am feeling very tired; my feet are sore and dry. It strikes me that this cool, damp soil would feel wonderful against my skin. So I take off my shoes and dig my feet into the ground.

This is heaven.

I had no idea the earth felt so good.

So like home. (Herrad, 'Bronwerdd' 88)

This conversion into a plant-being is figured as entirely positive by the first person narrator which signals an ironic engagement with Bronwerdd's hitherto negative perception of being transformed. By the story's conclusion, Bronwerdd claims the chef's power, takes on the role of creator/instigator and mutates another being according to her own desires.

### Mythic Goddesses: Branwen

Kate D'Lima's short story 'Branwen' (2008) engages with a latent theme in the source tale, that of internal transformation. D'Lima signals this through presenting a woman's awakening selfhood and her development of a voice which expresses

it. 'Branwen', written over three pages, is a reworking of the Second Branch of *The Mabinogi*.

In the source tale (S. Davies 22 – 34), Branwen is sister to the King of Britain, Bendigeidfran (also called Bran), who is a demi-god and giant. Bran, Branwen and their half-brothers, Efnysien and Nysien, meet with Matholwch, King of Ireland, when he sails to Wales and requests a partnership be established between the nations. Bran accepts and offers Matholwch marriage to Branwen so as to unite the countries and their sovereignty. This is agreed, but Efnysien is aggrieved at being omitted from the negotiations. In revenge he savagely disfigures all of Matholwch's horses which disrupts the agreement. As an apology for his brother's behaviour and to re-establish the marriage deal, Bran gifts Matholwch the miraculous Cauldron of Rebirth. Branwen and Matholwch wed, but after the birth of their son (Gwern), Matholwch and his people recall Efnysien's disrespect and punish Branwen for it by reducing her status to kitchen-maid, where she is often beaten. Branwen trains a starling to trill her name and she sends it, as a rescue beacon, to Bran. Bran responds by declaring war on Ireland. He wades the sea which separates Wales and Ireland and the ensuing battle destroys Ireland, Bran, Gwern and Matholwch. In Bran's absence he is deposed as King of Britain. Branwen dies of a broken heart, blaming herself for the fall of two nations.

D'Lima's 'Branwen' tells of a Swansea-born Bangladeshi woman who has been 'given away to Ahmed, her husband, to honour [her] late father's wish that she marry him and return to Bangladesh' (75). In this way D'Lima signals how, in the twenty-first century, Welsh mythic themes appear anew. Feminist awakening

is figured by re-visioning the mythic goddess Branwen, signalling a metaphorical transformation in a young Bangladeshi woman from Swansea. The narrative opens with Branwen already in Bangladesh. There Branwen's husband mistreats her and she is forced to live as a 'calumniated wife' (Wood 'Calumniated' 25), treated as a foreigner who brings shame on Ahmed and his family.

A thematic focus on transformation and the control, or lack of control, over the process of transformation persists in this short fiction. Bound up within this is the function of language and linguistic systems that articulate (or fail to articulate) perceptions of being and transformations of being. D'Lima's Branwen has nursed a damaged bird back to health and this myna bird, which is caged in the yard (a variation of Branwen's bird in the source tale), signifies the importance of language in D'Lima's re-vision of *The Mabinogi*. It is released by Branwen and yet it does not fly away, despite being fully healed. Instead it chatters a welcome 'with a varied repertoire of squawks, chirps, clicks and whistles' (D'Lima 74). In D'Lima's story, as in the original myth tale, birds are vital to Branwen's fortuitous escape from domestic abuse and degradation. The potential for change that brings a positive transformation for Branwen is figured in her communication with the myna bird:

'Talk to me first,' she said, teasing it. Branwen only spoke in English to the bird; Bangla was the sole language in the kitchen.

'Talk to me first,' the bird repeated, then laughed like Branwen, fluffed its feathers and said, 'The cook beats Branwen. Tell the ravens. Go and tell Bran.' It hopped about on strong yellow legs, squawking and clicking, pleased with its vocal display. It did an encore then flew back to Branwen's hand, making crooning noises. (D'Lima 74)



Throughout the narrative there is symbolic layering whereby birds and Branwen are increasingly metaphorically associated. Introduced to this metaphoric coupling is the figure of Bran who is also linked with birds – those of ravens (Bran means raven or crow in Welsh (S. Davies 281)). In the source Welsh myth tale the relationship between Bran, Branwen and birds, is implicitly figured. Here, in the modern reworking, D’Lima focuses on its importance; it is overtly, and fundamentally, the principal force behind Branwen’s rescue.

In the reworked version, Branwen’s name is glossed. ‘She remembered that her own name meant “white raven” in Welsh’ (D’Lima 74). Consolidating their relationship as humans and as bird-related avatars, Branwen remembers how she and her brother Bran, ‘had made up a secret language as children and believed it was the speech of the birds’ (D’Lima 74). The association between language, birds and the ability to exist autonomously is explicitly made here: the freedoms they enjoyed as children are soon restrained when they enter formal education. ‘To each other they spoke their secret raven language, until they went to school’ (D’Lima 75). Within D’Lima’s ‘Branwen’, Welsh mythology, verbal communication (including translation from Welsh to English and avian to English) and the freedom to think and act under independent agency, commingle to create a symbolic system that draws out themes only implied in the myth tale.

D’Lima’s Branwen transcends her marginal role as an abused wife whilst proactively engaging with the legacy of *The Mabinogi* and the mythic destiny gifted to her, through name, by her mother ‘who believed in the power of myths’ (D’Lima 75). When she confronts Ahmed, her abusive husband:

he saw that her face was bruised but that [Branwen] was still strong; perhaps stronger than him. Branwen saw the fear in him. [...] Instantly she knew she was free.

‘I need money and my passport,’ she said, and pushed past him [...]. She knew he wouldn’t stop her when she left for the station. (D’Lima 77).

At the end of the narrative Branwen is able to embrace the power of her namesake as she becomes the instigator of her own rescue and therefore her own internal transformation which influences her material existence. Unlike her namesake, however, she becomes regulator over her own destiny and writes her own happy ending.

### Mythic Goddesses: Rhiannon

Imogen Rhia Herrad’s ‘Rhiannon’s Bird’ (2010) engages with the First and Third Branches of *The Mabinogi* by drawing upon the Welsh goddess Rhiannon and her birds whose singing lulls the living to sleep and awakens the dead. The birds are mentioned in the Second Branch of *The Mabinogi*, and the later tale of ‘How Culhwch Won Olwen’.

In the First Branch, Rhiannon is a goddess who emerges from Annwn with the sole intention of marrying Pwyll, a mortal Welsh King. This marriage of her choosing saves her from an unwanted suitor chosen by her father. Pwyll and Rhiannon have a baby son who, whilst in the care of Rhiannon’s maidservants, is kidnapped by a mythic beast. To protect themselves from punishment the maidservants kill a puppy and smear Rhiannon with its blood as she sleeps, so as to accuse her of infanticide. With such indisputable evidence, the servants are

believed by Pwyll's people, but not by Pwyll. Therefore, instead of death, Rhiannon's punishment is to wear a horse's halter and to carry on her back anyone who wishes to enter Pwyll's court. She is exonerated when the mythical beast is killed and her son, who she names Pryderi, returns to court (S. Davies 3 – 21). Rhiannon and Pryderi also feature in the Third Branch of *The Mabinogi*, where they are both kidnapped to Annwn by Llwyd son of Cil Coed, who makes Rhiannon wear an ass's halter. They are rescued by her second husband, Manawydan (S. Davies 35 – 46).

Herrad's short narrative explores metaphorical transformation in ways similar to D'Lima. Birds signify a feminist awakening in an abused woman who is then empowered to end her suffering and the suffering of her sister. She is able to avenge that suffering through violent retribution against its perpetrator. As in D'Lima's 'Branwen' there is also a focus on how the relationship between language and Annwn becomes vital to a re-visioned engagement with Welsh mythology.

The story opens with the protagonist Rhiannon lying in the bunk bed of her mother's motor home, the family home, and feeling that although her mother's transient boyfriend, Jeff, has left, 'his hands are still on her, his fingerprints; as though he's marked her. [...] She feels grubby. And something else she hasn't got a word for. A nameless feeling swells inside her until she can't breathe, almost chokes' (Herrad, 'Rhiannon' 153). The opening paragraph suggests a reading of female disenfranchisement, abuse and diminution.

These concepts are articulated through Rhiannon's *inability* to articulate the horror of being sexually abused by Jeff. The failure of language to express the

female's maligned situation and her sense of being an appropriated, controlled and colonised body is further complicated towards the end of the narrative when Rhiannon is finally able to alert her mother to the threat that Jeff poses to Buddug, her six-year-old sister. Instead of protecting Rhiannon and Buddug, their mother (Annie) violently repudiates the accusation by slapping Rhiannon into silence (Herrad, 'Rhiannon' 159). Within the source tale for Herrad's 'Rhiannon's Bird', that of the First Branch of *The Mabinogi*, the theme of failed motherhood underpins much of the narrative (S. Davies 3 – 21). Motherhood, within Herrad's story, is figured as impuissant through Annie, but it is also reworked, presenting an alternative maternal mode as a site of power, autonomy and freedom. This reworking centres on the relationship between Rhiannon and her bird.

As Rhiannon prepares to return to the motor home after a walk on the beach she thinks: 'She needs something to take away from this beach. Something to remember. A weapon, she thinks, and immediately unthinks it. Something. Something glints in the grey-brown sand' (Herrad, 'Rhiannon' 156). Rhiannon instinctively desires a weapon from the beach to protect Buddug from sexual abuse. The thought was not consciously manifested, but came from her subconscious as she struggles to find a suitable 'something'. The incongruity of male centric language is again apparent here as Rhiannon struggles to find the apt description, or noun, for the 'thing' that she needs to take from the beach, a protective 'thing' that has no name in the language that she knows. It has no translation from the original other language of the feminine semiotic. 'Something' is the vague best that can be hoped for. In the moment that she dismisses the male

oriented ‘weapon’ she notices the ‘something’ that she has been seeking. The ‘something glinting on the beach’ (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 156) turns out to be a

creature [...] like a thing from a dream or from a nightmare. It has a long fierce golden beak and big black empty eyes, and its skin is like glass, like a jellyfish, so that Rhiannon can see through it; can see its red snaking veins full of blood and its coiling purple intestines, its pulsing heart and lungs spread like butterfly wings; and its delicate golden bones. It looks at her out of its bottomless eyes. The golden beak clicks. (Herrad ‘Rhiannon’ 157)

When ‘she goes to look’, it too ‘looks up at her’ (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 157). This uncanny creature is not a ‘thing’ of physical, normative reality and is instead Rhiannon’s fantastical bird summoned from Annwn.

Rosemary Jackson argues that fantastic narratives ‘can *tell of*, manifest or show desire [where] expression is in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention and [description]’ (3). The bird is a creature of the fantastic realm where ‘the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made “absent”’ (Jackson 4). For Jackson, fantasy is ‘to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* “new”, absolutely “other” and different’ (8). As a paraxial site that is between reality and non-reality, the beach symbolically and physically combines with Rhiannon’s desire for revenge. Rhiannon’s bird-creature emerges from this space.

Although the birds in D’Lima’s ‘Branwen’ and Herrad’s ‘Rhiannon’s Bird’ signal a positive transformation which empowers women to escape abuse, they are very different creatures. Ellen Moers explores the function of bird

metaphor in women's writing and asserts that the 'the more feminist the literary conception [...] the larger, wilder, crueller come the birds' (246). They 'come swooping, diving, slashing and killing their way into [...] twentieth-century [writing, where] frightening and monstrous [...] bird metaphor dominates the grotesqueries of modern women's literature' (Moers 246, 247). Jeni Williams argues that literary depictions of nightingales are often used to express and articulate a woman's 'survival in situations of powerlessness' (*Interpreting* 12). And Gwen Davies asserts that birds are often symbolised as 'an ally of the weak' (263). Rhiannon is a maternal figure who has created the bird, but it has not been born of sweetness to croon but, instead, signals 'a way for the imprisoned girl-child to become a free adult' (Moers 251). It is a physical representation of Rhiannon's desire for vengeance against her abuser, Jeff. The creature is a neonatal hatchling that recognises Rhiannon as its mother. It struggles to stand and as it does so, it attempts to communicate with her, 'clicking its beak at her more insistently' (Herrad, 'Rhiannon' 157). Its attempt to assert itself physically directly correlates with its attempt to assert itself through language.

Julia Kristeva defines the semiotic as a '*distinctiveness* admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) [...] to a signified object for a thetic consciousness (this side of, or through, both object and consciousness)' (133). Rhiannon's bird clicks at her in an attempt to communicate with her as its mother. These clicks can be situated within the realm of semiotic unarticulated language that is connoted to the maternal and to the pre-referential, pre-'mirror stage' (Kristeva 134) infant. Rhiannon's bird is both newly born and attempts to commune with the maternal body. It is a paraxial

creature, it is the excluded feminine, the supernatural and ghostly ‘other’ made fleshy and powerful; the language it ‘clicks’ enunciates from the fantastic, from the anterior semiotic realm.

When Rhiannon realises that Buddug is being molested by Jeff she calls upon her bird to protect her sister:

A sound fills her ears, a tortured shriek. [...]  
*The song of the Birds of Rhiannon, who could wake the dead.*  
 She hears the words in her mind as though somebody has said them.  
 And then she knows. The golden bird. [...]  
 It comes flapping towards her, answering her call. It is monstrous,  
 golden and beautiful and deadly. Has it awakened her or has she awakened  
 it? [...] It knows what she wants it to do. She knows where it’s going.  
 (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 160)

The Birds of Rhiannon in *The Mabinogi* are explicitly referenced here, with a focus on their ability to awaken the dead through singing: Annwn has literally hatched into the human world.

Upon finding Jeff in the act of violation, ‘Rhiannon wants to yell at him, to shout, to rage, but all that comes out of her mouth is a keening shriek’ (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 161). Rhiannon’s bird pecks at Jeff’s ‘forehead, his cheeks, his mouth. His eyes. His eyes are bottomless red holes now, streaming with blood. Finally he is crying for what he’s done’ (Herrad ‘Rhiannon’ 161). Walker asserts that the blinding of a man symbolises his castration with this symbolism appearing in the Biblical narrative of Samson and in the Greek narrative of Oedipus (142, 144). In a reversal of the mother-child relationship the bird now assumes the role of the avenging mother and symbolically castrates the paedophile, his screams smothered by the ‘keening call of the Bird of Rhiannon’ (Herrad ‘Rhiannon’ 161).

When the bird has finished its bloody retribution, Rhiannon and Buddug ‘scramble onto its back’, Rhiannon sits behind her sister and wraps ‘one protective arm around her’ (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 161). As the bird prepares to fly, Buddug asks Rhiannon where the bird is taking them; Rhiannon replies simply, ‘Away’ (Herrad, ‘Rhiannon’ 162). Germinating within Rhiannon from the beginning of the narrative has been her potential to claim freedom and safety for herself and Buddug. This finally blooms when Rhiannon acknowledges and accepts that her ‘natural’ home and role are in the semiotic otherworld of Welsh mythology in which a positive, asocial, maternally signified female power is most potent.

### The Birth of a New Mythic Goddess: Kia

Glenda Beagan’s ‘Yellow Archangel’ (2010) is set in the near future and tells of a world in which a viral holocaust has killed most of the human population: ‘There was no time, no leeway, to isolate the latest mutated variant, develop a vaccine, distribute it. It was like the Virus was laughing at us. In the first week to ten days people died in their hundreds of thousands. In less than three weeks they were dying in their millions’ (Beagan, ‘Yellow’ 200). Pockets of survivors are left, mostly in isolated rural areas but ‘by now there was no central government, just cobbled-together committees of local people who couldn’t do much but did their best’ (Beagan, ‘Yellow’ 201). The nameless narrator was a young woman with a young daughter, Kia, at the time that the virus reached its peak before abating.



Now as an elderly woman she narrates how she and her community coped in the aftermath of near extinction.

Published in 2010, Beagan's story signals a re-positioning of myth after Welsh devolution has been confidently established. Beagan engages with the process of mythopoeia; her short story acknowledges the significance of a coherent 'nationhood and the way in which this has been concomitant with the construction of mythical, idealised pasts' (Peach 16), but looks forward to a future mapped by a narrative still based on communal story-telling structures.

Showalter's model of the wild zone imaged as a site of women's experiences of culture, language and consciousness provides an illuminating insight into Beagan's 'Yellow Archangel.' To begin with, Beagan's narrator contemplates the concept of history, now meaningless in the wake of the pandemic and the dissolution of all infrastructures, cultures, societies and technologies. The narrator describes both the shock of seeing how quickly the world fell apart and how survivors were changed forever.

Nothing could be relied on anymore. [...] History would like to tell us otherwise but we're nothing really. Now I can see that time is one thing, and history another. One is a made thing, a construct that is never neutral. The other is. Simply is. All that remains is time and the land is its own story. (Beagan, 'Yellow' 199)

Dominant androcentric systems that previously prescribed the role of women in a culture, including the delineation and interpretation of history (Showalter 260), are now redundant. All that is left is the land and time itself. This discussion suggests that Beagan's post-apocalyptic world is presented as a wild zone, a space that brings 'into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness' (Showalter

263). Beagan explores the possibility of this new world's a-history (or rather, its gynocentric recording of the new epoch) through the figure of Kia, the narrator's daughter. Beagan's exploration integrates and interrogates the function of mythopoeia as the reader witnesses the 'birth' of a myth. Consequently, they may come to understand the process of mythopoeia.

After Kia falls dangerously ill with meningitis the narrator notes how, when fully recovered, despite receiving little medical help, Kia

was changed. She seemed so much older; quiet, melancholy. And there was another indefinable quality. Fey, maybe? She told us she was still alive because a yellow archangel had come for her [...]. The archangel had a message for Kia. She had a task now, a special responsibility. She was here to help people and give them hope. (Beagan, 'Yellow' 204)

In naming her daughter 'Kia', her mother has already established a link with the metaphysical realm. The etymology of 'Kia' is traced through the Swedish, 'Kristina', a Nordic form of 'Christina' (Dickens 47). In the Judeo-Christian mythology of Saints, Christina means a woman 'of God', first attributed to Christina Mirabilis (Saint Christina 1150 – 1224) (Dickens 47). Christina, through a confession of the faith, 'amply demonstrated her invulnerability to every ordinary method of execution' when tortured by pagans (Walker 165). Andrea Dickens recounts a variant Saint Christina narrative, describing how she would practice mortification of the flesh; she purposely sought out physical tortures – such as standing in fires or ovens – and emerged from them unscathed (47). In Beagan's short fiction it is suggested that Kia, like her namesake, has an affinity for metaphysicality, spirituality, and is invulnerable to physical harm after surviving two life-threatening diseases.

Kia describes how, in the throes of her meningitis fever, she was visited by a yellow archangel (Beagan, 'Yellow' 204). An archangel associated with yellow is Jophiel who was guardian of the tree of good and evil in Eden; it is suggested that it was he who expelled Adam and Eve (Lawrence). Jophiel's divine complement is Christine; it is believed that they were the first teachers in the world and are associated with wisdom, studying, aspiration, and the dissolution of narrow-mindedness ([www.ascension-research.org](http://www.ascension-research.org)). Kia, as an oracular child, shares many of these associations in her role as mythic mother. When her reputation as a new-world saviour begins to form, she had

people turning up at [her] door, insisting on seeing Kia, quite convinced that she could cure them, predict the future for them, [...] solve all their problems. She'd come back from the dead, hadn't she? She had all this wisdom to share, didn't she? And this child was ten years old! (Beagan, 'Yellow' 204)

Kia's mother is not quite convinced of Kia's preternatural capabilities. However, when she finds yellow archangels, a type of dead nettle, growing near her husband's grave she recognises 'a whole sequence of links' (Beagan, 'Yellow' 203) from which she infers an interconnectivity that she had not considered before. She notes how it is coincidental that she should have come across the flowers then, at her husband's grave and after Kia's illness; the last time she had seen them she had been a child and their name had struck her as 'magical' (Beagan, 'Yellow' 203). Now, after the Virus and Kia's meningitis, these flowers 'acquired a sudden relevance' for her (Beagan, 'Yellow' 202). T. F. Thiselton-Dyer records that in socio-cultural contexts, dead nettles and yellow flowers typically ward off harm and the devil, and they have been dedicated to Saint

Vincent and the Virgin Mary as they are also known as ‘Our Lady’s Hands’ (43, 186, 133, 152). Kia’s connections to Saint Christina, Jophiel and Christine, and yellow archangel plants do suggest an interconnectivity which casts Kia as a mythic oracle for the new millennium.

Kia’s mother, whilst suspicious of Kia’s veracity, acknowledges the function of mythic belief systems in the formation of culture and society, particularly when humans have been ‘living in fear of one kind or another, for so long, they need explanations that comfort them, that account for what’s going on, that show them that things will, maybe, get better’ (Beagan, ‘Yellow’ 203). She recognises that Kia can provide explanations and has come to fill the gap left by the disappearance of original mythic and folkloric narrative models. In other words, the narrator tells of the development of a gynocentric belief system in which Kia is central. Her mother, who narrates the story, suggests that:

Kia became an oracle. And then a kind of saint. Or maybe the word I want to use, but find myself hesitating over, though there were many who did not, is goddess. [...] I have lived long enough to see how a human being can become something more than human in the minds of needy people. And how their belief can strengthen them, can save them. (Beagan, ‘Yellow’ 205)

Beagan’s narrative figures the post-Viral world as a cultural ‘clean slate’ upon which new narratives can be traced, and the misogynies of the previous androcentric mythos can be reversed or recast to reflect the next stage of human evolution and experience. For Gwen Davies ‘Yellow Archangel’ suggests that ‘a valid role may come again for superstition’ (261).

After Kia's death her mother ponders how 'no one talks about death anymore. Not in so many words. We talk about the yellow archangel instead. My daughter's words have entered the language' (Beagan, 'Yellow' 206). Kia is a Welsh woman who has entered into the new mythic language of Wales, just as her forbears did before her. Mythic women who have historical origins (to varying degrees), such as Saint Melangell, Ceridwen, Aranrhod, Rhiannon, Saint Dwynwen, Saint Tydfil and Saint Winifred, have all been replaced by a 'new generation'. All will take their place in the incessant mythic overlay of history and in the ever evolving cycle of Welsh myths. In Glenda Beagan's 'Yellow Archangel' this process of change is figured in the rural landscape of Wales and a Welsh woman is placed at the centre of the post-Viral New World mythos.

Published in 2010, in a collection of short stories entitled *Sing Sorrow*, Beagan's optimistic dystopia, a concept defined by Jim Miller as the 'persistence of yearning in the midst of dystopia' (358), is identified as being part of a wider darkening of literature in the new decades of the second millennium, a darkening which has gathered pace as the hue of the new century has tarnished. In her 'Afterword' to the collection of short stories which includes Beagan's story, Gwen Davies suggests that consequently, the 'perennial genre of horror is [circa 2010] undergoing a particular renaissance' (264). This finds echo in recent popular fiction and cinematic successes which includes Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, first published in 2008, with its first cinematic instalment released in 2012. Television's 'high concept drama serial[s]' which signal an 'expansion of the family fantasy film' (G. Davies 264) can, I argue, include *The Walking Dead*, the zombie-apocalypse programme first televised in 2010 (created

by Robert Kirkman, it was published as a comic book serial in 2003). In addition the *Game of Thrones* television series was first televised in 2011, fifteen years after being published by George R. R. Martin as *A Game of Thrones* (1996). In dialogue with such narratives, Beagan's 'Yellow Archangel' presents a mythopoeic reaction to contemporary fears of viral holocausts, unethical science, corrupt regimes, and religious extremism that often instigates a redefinition of established concepts of faith and spirituality.

However, Kia's new world is recuperative and accords with Sarah LeFanu's analysis of dystopian writing. LeFanu argues that: 'dystopian visions are in a sense mythopoeic: depicting a creation myth in a future world of darkness and silence' (73). Kia, as a yellow archangel, provides light and comfort to her followers who would stand 'in a circle around [her] holding their hands towards her, palms flat, fingers stretched out as if they were warming themselves by a fire' (Beagan 'Yellow' 204). Beagan engages with a mythopoeic dystopia by exploring the new millennium as 'that nightmare land of silence in which the struggle for subjecthood and autonomous speech is paramount' (LeFanu 70). Further, Elisabeth Mahoney argues that 'feminist dystopia offers a supplementary place for the multiplying of textual identities, making space for an alternative feminine idiolect' (39). Ultimately, Beagan's short fiction tunes into contemporary dystopian sensibilities but assuages postmodern fears through positivist mythopoeia. As an oracle, who is also a Welsh woman, Kia's mythopoeic vision suggests an optimistic future built on gynocentric myth narratives. Kia uncovers myth's protean ability to become 'newly told stories [which weave] different patterns into the social fabric and [...] this is a continuous enterprise' (M. Warner,

*Managing* xiv). Myth will always persist and whether it is positivist or reductionist depends on the frame upon which it is woven. In Beagan's new world order, patriarchal regimes cease to exist and now it is Kia's feminist utopian idiolect which 'can sew and weave and knit' (M. Warner, *Managing* xiv) new mythopoeic patterns.

### Conclusion

These Anglophone short stories written by Welsh women suggest that Wales occupies a liminal space where the Welsh mythic past is never in the past. Again, Welsh time is not linear and is instead cyclical: actions of Welsh mythic ancestors are repeated, constantly tapping into contemporary contexts. All of the short stories explored in this chapter engage with the cyclic nature of their source Welsh folk, fairy and myth tales.

Short stories by Welsh women writers in the early twentieth century uncover latent themes of transformation which in turn explore notions of gender and national identity. They draw on folkloric intertexts to demonstrate how figures from Annwn and humanity interpose into each other's world. Welsh fairies and humans cross paths, sometimes as friends and sometimes as enemies. Regardless of the positive or negative outcomes of such interaction, both sides feel the impact of engaging with their neighbour. Tensions between indigenous cultures and incomer influence are explored by emphasising Wales as a 'contact zone' (Bohata, *Postcolonialism* 131) and a liminal space.

Between 2001 and 2009, the shift to a mythic mode of writing similarly examines Welsh time as a palimpsest in addition to Wales being a liminal border

between metaphysical and human realms. There is also a focus upon transformation and such a thematic focus is central to Anglophone Welsh women's revisions of *The Mabinogi*. In these short stories images of metamorphosis and transition are frames through which notions of gender and national identity, in the years of nascent devolution, are interrogated.

Mythic queens, namely Rhiannon, Branwen and Blodeuwedd reappear, revealed as modern-day presences. However, modern-day reincarnations of such medieval Welsh queens must demonstrate a willing connection to myth – a hope, a dream, a wish, a desire to improve their situation, in order to draw strength from their mythic female ancestor. This psychic, emotional bond (a specific type of Welsh female *hiraeth* maybe?) exists in a liminal space where the borders between time and space, land and sea, Swansea and Bangladesh, flora and fauna, human, bird and plant, are collapsed. Such blurring of boundaries allows immediate twentieth-century access to the medieval power of Welsh mythic Queens. Maligned Welsh women may look inside, and outside themselves, to claim the strength that is their birthright so that, as they transform themselves and their lives, they too become 'monstrous, golden and beautiful and deadly' (Herrad, 'Rhiannon' 160). Therefore, the stories analysed here do not accord with Stephen Knight's analysis of a selection of short stories written by Welsh women which were published in 2000, stories which he identifies as 'gender-neutral [through] dissolving previous structures of discrimination' (175). In the new millennium, there is evidence to suggest that 'previous structures of discrimination', such as gender and colonialism, still resonate with Welsh women writers. They are far from 'uninterested [or] unaware' (Knight 175).



In the era of newly devolved Welsh governance, these stories trace a forward movement, looking forward to new Welsh paradigms of feminist and national identities. Thus shifting concepts of gender and nationhood, through the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, anticipate new mythic narratives, precisely because they are protean by nature. Newly crafted myth tales explore how stories of Wales and its people evolve whilst re-emphasising the place and significance of storytelling within that future-facing nation.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Welsh Myth and Folklore in Anglophone

### Poetry

#### Introduction

Welsh women poets frequently rework Welsh myth and folklore so that they may tell ‘a new kind of story about Wales’ (Entwistle 124). Their re-visions of phallogentric Welsh mythic and poetic traditions imagine ‘new kinds of stories’ which reflect, and potentially produce, contemporary Welsh cultural-political contexts. Welsh poetry, in both languages of Wales, is closely bound to notions of national identity. Jeremy Hooker argues that ‘the theme of identity recurs: personal identity, national identity or cultural identity, ultimately human identity’ (*Imagining* 3). Zoë Skoulding further suggests that:

the relationship between nationhood, gender and poetry is an interesting one in Wales [...], a place where poetry in both languages has been tremendously significant as a marker of national identity. Traditionally it has been associated with men, primarily with bardic figures. (Skoulding qtd. in Wild 10)

According to Skoulding such an identity has been gendered according to masculine paradigms. However, she argues, ‘from the 1980s, Gillian Clarke’s work [for example] developed a connection between feminism and place-based identity politics in Wales, and her new role as National Poet affirms that some of those [gender-based] struggles have been won’ (Skoulding qtd. in Wild 9). M. Wynn Thomas also comments on how Gillian Clarke’s mythic poetry ‘consistently tries to redress the balance – of the historical record, in social

arrangements, of cultural life – in favour of previously slighted female experience’ (*Corresponding* 201). Hooker asserts that by drawing on mythic traditions, ‘the work of Welsh women poets is important both to their Welsh identity and to their sense of themselves as women’ (‘Ceridwen’s Daughters’ 143).

The following discussion examines how cultural-political discourses of Wales, in the latter half of the twentieth century, are represented through poetic creations which revision Welsh myth and folklore. Hooker suggests that Welsh women Anglophone poets often provide ‘evidence that ideas of the Otherworld continue to haunt the secular imagination in Wales’ (*Imagining* 3). Poets selected for analysis in this thesis engage with a continued presence of the Welsh Otherworld. I argue that such engagements demonstrate how Welsh myth, folk and fairy tales continuously facilitate a creative response to their experiences of gender and nationhood. In turn, this response is often posed as an uncovering of, and challenge to, hegemonic paradigms. Entwistle argues that ‘the story of a nation’s changing sense of cultural identity can be re-understood in and through the herstories its history must frame’ (2). I add that reworked Welsh myth and folk narratives are a neglected element of those herstories; a recovery of those stories, and their sources, assists in the re-understanding of Wales’s ‘changing sense of cultural identity’ (Entwistle 2). Welsh women poets have consistently drawn upon Welsh goddesses from *The Mabinogi*, specifically Rhiannon, Branwen, Olwen and Blodeuwedd, to explore what it means to them to be a Welsh woman in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

For Linden Peach, Welsh women's poetry often 'articulates the complexities and tensions in the condition of being a woman and gives voice to the unexpressed emotions and experiences of women over the centuries' (94). Therefore Welsh women poets utilise Welsh myth to draw upon Blodeuwedd, Rhiannon, Branwen, and Olwen as these Welsh queens represent a simultaneity where boundaries between then and now are collapsed, thus allowing poets to explore frames of gender and nationhood synchronically and diachronically.

By 2002 the influence of Welsh women writers who came to prominence in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, writers such as Christine Furnival, Gillian Clarke, Menna Elfyn and Gwyneth Lewis, was still growing as they continued to write in the new era of Welsh devolution. Over the latter decades of the twentieth century such writers had proven to be more than a transient influence and had gone from strength to strength. An apposite example of Welsh women writers' continuing influence is to be found in Gwyneth Lewis's poetic/architectural contribution to the Wales Millennium Centre, opened in 2004, viewed as an iconic representation of Welsh poetic traditions.

According to Gwyneth Lewis, Welsh women poets are engaged in an open and on-going dialogue with each other as well as with readers of their poetry. This accords with gynocentric folkloric traditions because women have been involved in casting new forms of tales. In her analysis of this casting, Orenstein draws on metaphors of weaving and spinning so that tale-telling becomes a network of threads and patterns, in which each tale and teller are connected to the next (15). She argues that women writers who rework fairy and folk tales can be seen to be picking up the threads from their materfamilias. Similarly Welsh women poets are

in ‘conversation with other people and minds, even though those with whom [they] speak – other storytellers among them – aren’t physically present’ (G. Lewis ‘Afterword’ 254). They are variously interconnected: as poets, as women poets, as women tellers of folklore, and as women revisionists of myth. This concept of interconnectivity is developed in chapter six in which Lewis suggests all writers are ‘a meat tree of sorts’ (‘Afterword’ 253), but is useful here as it crystallises the relationship between Welsh women writers’ creative imaginary which, as a type of family tree, can also be labelled a ‘collective imaginary’ (Entwistle 7). Welsh women writers engage with each other’s work and with the Welsh male tradition so that intertexts may be discerned within their work. Additionally Welsh women poets often give credit to those poets who inspired them to delve into their own creative imaginary.

This dialogue suggested by Lewis is noted by poets and scholars alike; for example, Entwistle comments on Gillian Clarke’s ‘Letter from a Far Country’ stating that it ‘did much to encourage women writing poetry to turn to their gender-community’ (7). In an interview with Entwistle, Gwyneth Lewis credits Gillian Clarke with the dissolving the boundaries of the Welsh poetic canon to the benefit of all Welsh women poets, including herself. Lewis argues that

what Gillian did was to make a massive claim for [...] domesticity, as being equal in high seriousness to anything that male poets were writing about...which has meant that we are free *not* to consider that realm. I’ve been freed up by Gillian’s work to look at other things. (G. Lewis qtd. in Entwistle 7)

This finds a parallel with M. Wynn Thomas’s analysis of Menna Elfyn’s poetic response to a miscarriage in which she uses ‘an ancient genre, for the first time, to

express a mother's anguish' (*Corresponding* 208). Elfyn also dissolved boundaries to free up the collective imaginary so that Welsh women writers might, as 'meat trees', bear new poetic fruit. Gillian Clarke has spoken of her 'high regard' for Anne Stevenson, citing her as an inspiration and dedicating poetry to her (Peach 79) and Menna Elfyn discusses how Nesta Wyn Jones influenced her early poetry (Entwistle 30).

M. Wynn Thomas notes that Gillian Clarke and Menna Elfyn are close personal friends and have 'collaborated on various creative writing programmes' (*Corresponding* 145). Menna Elfyn edited a collection of essays dedicated to Gillian Clarke, entitled *Trying the Line: A Volume of Tribute to Gillian Clarke* (1997), and suggests that Clarke's 'work and life has been about sharing and making connections' ('Introduction' 11). Christine Evans asserts that Clarke's 'influence is everywhere, her tracks easy to follow' (83). As a final example of this continuing pattern of reciprocal influence, Hooker writes that 'Hilary Llewellyn-Williams has paid tribute to the part played by Gillian Clarke [...] in starting her writing again after a period of self-doubt and uncertainty' (*Imagining* 157). Llewellyn-Williams describes Clarke as a 'powerful factor' and a 'perfect model' ('Through the Telescope' 26) for any aspiring poet to follow.

Through considering Welsh women poets' myth focussed 'collective imaginary' and how their mythic poetic rewavings can often be read as a dialogue, generational influence can be charted through the latter decades of the twentieth century: consequently, shifts in thematic focus, experimentation in form, and the dissolving of canon boundaries can also be charted. These generational shifts also demonstrate how frames of gender and nationhood are produced and

evolved with poets acknowledging antecedents and peers whilst germinating new off-shoots of the poetic family tree.

### Mythic Goddesses: Blodeuwedd.

Katie Gramich notes that at the close of the twentieth century, feminist influence had not only entered the poetic tradition of Wales, but had instigated a profusion of feminist engagement with the male poetic tradition. Welsh women feminist poets turned to the demi-goddess, Blodeuwedd, who then became increasingly prominent in their poetic output. Gramich argues that:

Blodeuwedd becomes, for many writers, a feminist heroine, who refuses the male order and gains her freedom, not an emblem of sexual immorality who is punished for her sins. By the turn of the [twentieth] century, Blodeuwedd had herself become something of a stereotype in Welsh women's writing, but it was almost as if every female writer was obscurely called upon at this stage to interpret Blodeuwedd. (Gramich, *Twentieth* 162)

Whilst Blodeuwedd's prominence as a poetic subject is not surprising given her subjection within the source tale of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* (S. Davies 47), Gramich suggests that an over-zealous engagement with Blodeuwedd meant the character became 'a stereotype' (*Twentieth* 162) within Welsh women's Anglophone writing.

Welsh women writers often re-vision the Blodeuwedd myth tale as a more gynocentric narrative to be 'told by women, among women and for women' (M.W. Thomas, *Corresponding* 189). Women writers were turning to Welsh literary and mythic traditions in order to not only explore gender imbalances

within them, but also to investigate the core values that constituted the frames of reference for those traditions. As poetry and nationhood are particularly cognate within Welsh literary culture women writers were also commenting upon gender issues in relation to Welsh nationhood, thereby extending (and perhaps in later works, consolidating) that ‘connection between feminism and place-based identity politics in Wales’ (Skoulding qtd. in Wild 10).

In *Corresponding Cultures* (1999) M. Wynn Thomas draws upon (Welsh-language) critical essays by Jane Aaron and Delyth George to argue that Blodeuwedd’s appeal is felt on both sides of the language divide and Blodeuwedd, as a subject of Welsh women’s poetry, is prevalent in both Welsh and English language works (188). Thomas agrees with Aaron’s assertion that Welsh women’s Welsh language engagement can be divided along two themes:

Blodeuwedd tends either to represent the loneliness and guilt that accrues to women excommunicated from society for transgressing the moral code, or to stand for the rebelliousness of those who set established, male-dominated society at defiance [...]. The latter view usually involves seeing Blodeuwedd as instancing natural feminine energies – and energies linking woman to nature – that have been oppressed and distorted by the dominant, repressive social order established and jealously patrolled by men. (Aaron translated and qtd. in M.W. Thomas, ‘Place, Race and Gender’ 5)

Whilst this thematic binary may hold true for the many poems published before the turn of the millennium, Anna Lewis’s engagement with the Blodeuwedd source tale (published in 2011) presents a post-devolution and more radical imagining of the Welsh goddesses. This reworking is suggestive of fresh possibilities for new thematic directions in the twenty-first century.



Gramich lists four Welsh women poets who drew upon Blodeuwedd in order to interrogate notions of identity in the closing decades of the twentieth century: Gillian Clarke, Angharad Jones (writing in Welsh), Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, and Glenda Beagan (1962). I would add Brenda Chamberlain (1958), Christine Furnival (1978), Nesta Wyn Jones (1986), Rose Flint (1991), Elin Llwyd Morgan (1993), Mererid Puw Davies (1996), Catherine Fisher (1999), Elin ap Hywel (2002), Zoe Brigley (2007), and Anna Lewis (2011) to that list.<sup>8</sup>

Within the closing decades of the twentieth century, a significant number of Welsh women writers produce poetry that draws upon the mythic Blodeuwedd. They rework Blodeuwedd's tale in order to interrogate the experiences of women living in late twentieth-century Wales. Considering poems which explicitly take Blodeuwedd as a subject rather than a tacit mythic reference (and thus discounting Brenda Chamberlain's 'Women on the Strand' (1958) and Christine Furnival's 'The Music Lesson' (1978)), there is a twenty-six year time span between Gillian Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' (1985) and Anna Lewis's 'Goewin' (2011). Although Anglophone Blodeuwedd poems do appear over the course of 1958 to 2011, there is a cluster of poems that explicitly engage with the character of Blodeuwedd, all published between 1985 and 2002.

Elin ap Hywel's 'Owl Report' is published in 2002 within her facing-page translation of Welsh poems, entitled *Ffiniau Borders*. The poem presents Blodeuwedd as a first person speaker providing an account of her transformations. The tone is chatty and informal and works to subvert the high language of Classical myth and its Latinate traditions. Blodeuwedd states that after 'a century

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<sup>8</sup> Dates in parenthesis indicate the year in which their Blodeuwedd poems were published. Some are later than the publication of Gramich's study.

or two' she is 'beginning to get used to / birdishness' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36). Ap Hywel's Blodeuwedd closes the distance between myth and ordinary reality whilst acknowledging how such a process is often painful. She states: 'It's a big step, looking back. / Sometimes the past gets me by the gullet, / weighing down heavy' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36). Collapsing distinctions, such as those between past and present timeframes or feats of spectacular and everyday magic, is a common trope of both women's recuperation of patriarchal myth tales and of Welsh source myth tales. Here then, ap Hywel engages with both feminist reclamation of a Welsh myth figure and with narrative modes that sit at the heart of Welsh myth traditions.

Progression of time is collapsed for ap Hywel's Blodeuwedd for whom 'life [is] as short as a mouse's memory, / a squeak between one darkness and the next' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36). Despite her physical transformations, this Blodeuwedd is a testament to female endurance through patriarchal subjection. She has been acclimatising to her new form 'for a century or two' and reports that 'flying is getting easier [...] and landing has become much, much smoother. / Aerodynamic' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36), in fact. Although she has no control over her physical state and its alteration she is still able to retain/maintain a sense of unchanging selfhood; by rationalising her predicament she makes peace with her lack of control and embraces the marginal existence into which she has been forced by the men in her life (Lleu and Gwydion). She rationalises that as a human woman she was far more subjugated, recalling how: 'I never did like the way / the multi-coloured silk gowns / stuck to my sides in the heat / on those

endless afternoons' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36). Gendered social protocols are encoded in the wearing of silk gowns which physically and socially bind her.

Ap Hywel's poem concludes with Blodeuwedd ruminating upon the freedoms her owl 'birdishness' affords her:

Feathers are really much better for you.  
They're dry and light, like leaves or flowers:  
they don't show the blood as much.  
It's much, much easier to keep them clean. (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36)

As in many Classical myth tales, and as in the Welsh source tale, female autonomy has been punished through ostracising the female and making her monstrous, but in ap Hywel's poem this monstrosity is claimed as an empowered state. In this final stanza, Blodeuwedd embodies the paradoxical: she is a figure of transformation and a figure of constancy, caught 'somewhere between twilight and dusk' (ap Hywel, 'Owl' 36). Her inner life, including her ability dispassionately to assess and rationalise her situation, remains untouched. It signifies a resistance through guerrilla type strategies where at each instance of exclusion, subjection and enforced transformation, Blodeuwedd carries on regardless.

This embracing of the margins after being ostracised from the androcentric centre is also to be found in Glenda Beagan's revision of the Blodeuwedd myth. However, Beagan's recuperation goes further in questioning the truth-claims that underpin the source myth and the patriarchal paradigms which sit at its heart. Beagan interrogates Welsh myth to expose an intrinsic male authority to which society defers, and which determines society's notions of sin, transgression, and punishment. Gramich suggests that Beagan's revision of the Blodeuwedd myth

has the woman/owl 'speaking and celebrating her freedom' (*Twentieth* 162). A closer examination of Beagan's poem reveals a more intricate revision than a straightforward celebration of a woman's emancipation from the fetters of her master.

Beagan's 'Blodeuwedd' is included in Gramich's edited collection of *Welsh Women's Poetry: 1460-2001* (2003) and also features a first person speaker. Blodeuwedd recounts her birth into the world and the manner in which she is given life and consciousness. Blodeuwedd is aware of her male creator, of his gender, and the fact that his central motivation is sexual gratification. She states: 'Lust was the loom / I was woven on / the man who webbed me / knowing nothing / human' (Beagan, 'Blodeuwedd' 260).

In being keenly aware of her birth, in experiencing the physicality of the process and in vocalising the emotional and cognitive experiences of birth, the speaker of Beagan's 'Blodeuwedd' is situated outside human experience. Blodeuwedd is born into maturity, into knowingness and can rationalise her experiences and commit them to memory. Blodeuwedd is unnaturally 'pulled [...] into life' (Beagan, 'Blodeuwedd' 260) and is not 'from the race that is on this earth at present' (S. Davies 58). She is already a marginal being, an 'othered' female who exists on the periphery as both a woman and a non-human creature.

At the end of the poem, Beagan's Blodeuwedd, as an excluded monstrous female, asks, 'So how is this punishment?' (Beagan, 'Blodeuwedd' 260). In posing such an ambiguous question she challenges her accusers and their patriarchal paradigms to consider alternative modes of being. What they deem to be punishment according to their values is actually a boon for an exogenous or

marginal being. Like Elin ap Hywel's Blodeuwedd, Beagan's Blodeuwedd subverts misogynist centripetal power structures by embracing the margin. As an owl, she is 'glad to be free' (Beagan, 'Blodeuwedd' 260).

Zoe Brigley's 'Blodeuwedd' (*The Secret* (2007)) and Rose Flint's 'Green-Girl, Mill-Man' (*Blue Horse of Morning* (1991)), similarly engage with the Welsh mythic character of Blodeuwedd but do so in a way that figures the mythic character as actively engaging with patriarchal imposition and abuses. Here, she seeks to regain/retain control from within the male centre which struggles to dominate her. At the conclusion of both poems it is suggested that, ultimately, patriarchy has failed to restrain Blodeuwedd. Unlike Beagan's infallible patriarchal paradigms that impose hegemony upon all women, Brigley and Flint subvert the perceived infallibility of such hegemony when their recovered Blodeuwedd characters spill out, takeover, and attack from within. This is survival as feminist guerrilla strategy, much like Elin ap Hywl's 'Owl Report', but the fight is taken from the margins to the misogynist centre.

Brigley's Blodeuwedd is married and strains against the boundaries placed upon her as a result; she is a creature of transformation and cannot be bound within her gendered role as a human wife. Here Blodeuwedd exists in a world of rupture and change where everything is subject to transitory shifts. The 'sheep in the barn / are mewling' and her husband's 'muddied forehead burst / into a criss-cross of lines [...] He frowns so he has an old man's face' (Brigley 18).

Blodeuwedd is figured as an agent of such transformation as it is because of her that her husband frowns. He emerges from the periphery, from the outside: 'In the window's black, a face peers in: / my husband' (Brigley 18). Windows,

reflections, mirrors are sites of cross-over between worlds; they are points of contact and liminality and, in this instance, Blodeuwedd's husband must reach through such a space in order to engage with his wife.

This milieu of constant shift and change is tinged, however, with images of violence, death, infanticide and sex. Blodeuwedd chases a boy she encounters in woodland and recalls 'fingers in damp hair' and her husband returns to the kitchen carrying 'dead owlets / in a metal bucket' (Brigley 18), owlets which could have been birthed by Blodeuwedd. Regardless of her human form, within a contemporary setting of a farmhouse kitchen with electric lamps and kitchen cupboards, Blodeuwedd cannot escape her association with sex, death, violence and transformation. In drowning the owlets even Blodeuwedd's husband is engaged in a generational battle to break her curse, or lessen its predatory presence in the forest.

Brigley's 'Blodeuwedd' presents an engagement with nationhood whereby Blodeuwedd's private thoughts are conveyed in italicised Welsh. Brigley provides an English translation in the collection's end notes, but as the poem opens with four lines of Welsh, the monoglot English reader must locate the translations immediately. Blodeuwedd, in woman form, is still highly attuned to nature and her owl-like instincts which, figured through the use of the language, are Welsh. Blodeuwedd states, 'It's one way to live' (presented in Welsh by Brigley as 'Mae'n un ffordd i fyw') which her husband translates into English 'It's a way of making a living.' (Brigley 18). He translates her Welsh in a way that slightly skews its meaning. Although this is a universal and inherent problem in all acts of translation, it becomes noteworthy here as the treatment of Welsh myth, gender

and nationhood draws upon postcolonial and feminist discourses, where the colonisation of nation, language and the female are interrogated.

Discussing the art of translating Welsh language source texts into English, M. Wynn Thomas argues that ‘every translation [...] is actually born, willy-nilly, into [...] a specific politico-cultural situation, a significant aspect of which is the equality, or inequality, of power between the source language [...] and the target language’, he suggests that the specific politico-cultural context alters the meaning of the text (*Corresponding* 111). Brigley’s poem signals this disparity in meaning when a source language is translated and demonstrates the inherent difficulties in mapping meaning across discrete cultures. The husband’s English translation places the original meaning within an economic context, in this case the rural economy of farming. This is his ‘way of making a living’ and thus his personal context influences his translation. As an English speaker he takes the source language and translates it according to his own referents; he assimilates it into his own experience and changes its meaning accordingly. Blodeuwedd’s husband has imposed his ‘hegemonic language and an imperialist anglophone culture’ (M.W. Thomas, *Corresponding* 115) upon his wife’s indigenous Welsh language and nationhood.

Tension between coloniser and colonised, between division and healing is figured in Rose Flint’s ‘Green-Girl, Mill-Man’, in which power struggles between Welsh and English, and between nature and industry, are explicitly gendered. In this poem, Gwydion, as the all-powerful and corrupting male power, dominates Blodeuwedd: ‘Teeth in the neck he bridled the green-girl / scoldings of bud and bird, black smoke’ (Flint 60), and what he cannot dominate he destroys: ‘his cock

chimney rearing, / piercing her glade, her freshwater / silk on his harsh brick bones' (Flint 60). In 'Green-Girl, Mill-Man' Blodeuwedd is figured allegorically, she is woman-as-nation who is raped and mutilated. She is an impoverished female landscape, colonised by androcentric industry that is imaged through a water-mill that serves an engine house. Heavy industries of metalwork, stone-quarrying and coalmining have moved into her leafy glades and laid waste to her.

Stanza two, however, signifies a fight back reminiscent of Artemis's revenge on the curious Actaeon in Classical myth: 'But now she has you, mill-man / in your hardness. [...] // Now she will ruin you, with her hounds / Moss and Lichen, Spore, Seed and Time' (Flint 60). From a Welsh perspective, Flint's allegorical Blodeuwedd disrupts the androcentric centre: 'She has set her trees on you [Gwydion] like young dogs' (Flint 60). Here, the hunter has become the hunted. Nature / Blodeuwedd, once abused and used for the desire and advancement of patriarchy's obsessive industrial and technological advancement, is now reclaiming what was taken, mutilated and destroyed. Both poets, Flint and Brigley, re-cast Blodeuwedd as violent avenger who is capable of taking the means through which she has been oppressed and using them against those who dominate her. This has a direct parallel with the Welsh source tale within *The Mabinogi*, where Blodeuwedd is created to satisfy male sexual desire and, as a result, uses her sexuality to undermine her husband, Lleu.

Nesta Wyn Jones and Hilary Llewellyn-Williams also engage with Welsh mythology via the figure of Blodeuwedd: in their poems Blodeuwedd is an autonomous being who retains absolute control over her existence and her transformations. She is also an equal, if not a dominant, partner in her relations



with men, specifically with Gwydion at the point of her creation from flowers. Blodeuwedd's dominance is also bound up with notions of transformation whereby the progression of time is not figured linearly, but is palimpsestic and experienced as a kaleidoscopic rupturing of one incidence of time into the next.

Nesta Wyn Jones's 'Blodeuwedd', translated into English by Gramich in her edited collection *Welsh Women's Poetry 1460-2001* (2003), demonstrates Jones's deftness in 'combining the traditional with a modern, often political consciousness [where] she excels at simple, lyrical pieces [...] descriptive of the everyday miracle' (Gramich *Twentieth* 139). 'Blodeuwedd' sets the scene of 'tiny, fragile flowers / reaching for the sun / on spindly legs' (N.W. Jones 251). Here is a heady, drowsy, hallucinogenic nature that is collectively sentient and it is into this dreamy, paradisaal, unspoilt scene that Gwydion wanders: 'That's when / Gwydion came to walk in the dew / And he fell for them' (N.W. Jones 251). In a reversal of the source tale, Blodeuwedd is created subconsciously, as a by-product of Gwydion's love.

Gwydion has stumbled upon this patch of natural beauty and, in some respects, is wooed by the flowers and their desire to participate in transformative processes, suggested by their 'reaching for the sun' (N.W. Jones 251). Blodeuwedd and Gwydion unite in a sharing of seduction, love and metaphysical exchange. There is no evidence here of phallocentric abuse, instead the 'Tiny, fragile flowers [...] their beauty turned to a misty column / Which breathed before him / A cold, lovely woman' (N.W. Jones 251). In Jones's reworking Gwydion, Math and Lleu are not figured as the domineering patriarchs who command a pliant Mother Nature to their bidding. Gwydion is unintentionally drawn into a

cycle of creation and transfiguration that already existed. The flowers chose to take the form of a woman as they ‘breathed’ (N.W. Jones 251) themselves into existence.

In the final stanza this cycle of transfiguration is cast as a way in which women writers may engage with a gynocentric storytelling tradition. The cycle is signalled as the voice of the poem indicates a shift in time: ‘Then, one evening, when the light flowers / Were bright and still like spirits’ (N.W. Jones 251). Like Gillian Clarke’s Olwen who is discussed below, Blodeuwedd arrives as a messenger from the creative imaginary, as ‘a poor white owl’ (N.W. Jones 251). Blodeuwedd is a Welsh foremother ‘from the deepest dark of the forest [who approaches] like the memory of summer [and challenges] ink to flow over the parchment’ (N.W. Jones 251). Blodeuwedd encourages the Welsh woman poet to not only re-vision phallogentric Welsh mythic and poetic traditions, but to present an alternative perspective within their accepted narratives. Both Blodeuwedd’s and Gwydion’s stories are re-visioned so that the woman poet may tell ‘a new kind of story about Wales’ (Entwistle 124) which uncovers and challenges hegemonic discourses of gender and nation.

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams’s ‘The Song of Blodeuwedd on May Morning’ (*The Tree Calendar* 1997) removes Gwydion from the cycle of creation and casts Blodeuwedd as responsible for her own self. In this revision Blodeuwedd is the first-person speaker chanting the poem as a spell over the man she has chosen to become her lover. Blodeuwedd is in complete control of her sexuality, her physical being, and her selfhood. Gramich suggests that Llewellyn-Williams’s collection *The Tree Calendar* includes ‘mythologically inflected poems’ (Gramich

*Twentieth* 157). Hooker argues that they draw ‘upon an ancient tradition of female shamanism to feminize the bardic role’: ‘her poems are counter-spells against a bad time’ (*Imagining* 158).

Here, Blodeuwedd’s incantations are focussed upon seducing her chosen ‘strong young man [her] moon-mate’ and her refrain – ‘my spell I cast on you [...] my spell has found you [...] See! I have chosen you [...] I await you [...] I draw you [...] and I wait for you’ (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘The Song’ 45, 45) emphasises not only her power over a man but also her revelling in possessing such a power. Hooker states that the strengths of *The Tree Calendar* are its ‘realization of mythic consciousness in terms of sensuous and imaginative experience, rooted in the landscape, and the poet’s use of her sexuality as a poetic energy’ (‘Ceridwen’s Daughters’ 127). Her seduction of a man is posed as a game and she is aroused by her own sense of influence and dominance. She commands her lover to join her:

When you hear my voice, my cry  
when you see the oak blossoming  
when you feel the owls pass by  
fetch your staff and run from your door –  
it is I, woman of flowers, who calls  
who holds wide her wings for you. (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘The Song’ 46)

As a collection, Jeremy Hooker suggests that *The Tree Calendar* affirms the power of Welsh mythological imagination, but indicates that it is also defensive and forced to the margin (*Imagining* 159). This, he argues, is cognate with his analysis of the Welsh mythological imagination.

I argue that ‘The Song of Blodeuwedd on May Morning’ does indicate a defensive force excluded to the margin, but also presents a female shaman freely

savouring her powers, with Blodeuwedd declaring ‘Skilful woman am I / and dancing woman am I [...] with calmness, with care, / with breastmilk, with dew, / my web I weave’ (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘The Song’ 45). In some feminist revisions of the source tale discussed elsewhere in this chapter, it is Gwydion who is portrayed as revelling in his dominance over Blodeuwedd, as in Rose Flint’s ‘Green-Girl, Mill-Man’ which imagines Gwydion’s ‘Teeth in the neck he bridled the green-girl’ (60). Here, however, it is Blodeuwedd who is the enchanter with supreme influence over another being. She demands her lover be ready for her when she calls him ‘stumbling warm / from [his] bed’ (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘The Song’ 46).

Hilary Llewellyn-Williams’s ‘Two Rivers’ (*Book of Shadows* 1990) presents another collapsing of time and space where a modern re-enactment of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* conflates the original action of the source with the enactment’s modern-day audience. Past mythic events rupture into the ‘now’ of the poet’s everyday reality with a blurring of topographical features:

Along the footpath from the post office  
they ran to fetch her; but she’d flown  
with her white face turned into the alder scrub  
in a flurry of wings and claws. (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘Two Rivers’ 24)

A twentieth-century post office and a twelfth-century woodland intersect ‘whilst in the long red meadow / Two princes fought a battle’ (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘Two Rivers’ 24) in a synchronal snapshot of past and present events. Therefore, Llewellyn-Williams raises questions of veracity in the original myth tales which have been handed down through generations of storytellers, redactors and

translators. These narratives have been open to amendment according to the social milieu of any particular society/culture/audience through which they passed. It is this protean ability that has assured their survival as myth tales, so that they could be enjoyed by twelfth-century audiences and twentieth-century villagers ‘with pop and crisps and bright-striped folding / chairs’ (Llewellyn-Williams, ‘Two Rivers’ 24). The poem’s speaker questions the linear progression of time by querying how far the modern-day scene mimics the original. The act of re-enactment, so to speak, instigates a rupturing of past into present time and storytelling is again a factor in such a breach.

Wales as a palimpsest features strongly within the poetry by Welsh women writers who engage with Welsh myth traditions in their writing. Drawing upon C.W. Sullivan III, a scholar of Welsh and Celtic myth in fantasy fiction, Becker and Noone concur that ‘Wales is not really Wales at all; it is a fantastic space, a space that partakes of the real Wales but is not the same. [However,] the idea of Wales remains grounded in an earthly setting with a distinct geographical location and history’ (3). In her essay, ‘Myth and History’ (2011), Catherine Fisher also argues that within fantastic literature which draws upon Welsh myth as source material, Wales is portrayed as a paraxial space (47).

As I have argued previously, Catholicism allows for a layered experience and representation of Wales whereby there is a ‘linking [of] heaven to the underworld’ (Tuan 149). We have seen how this liminal connection informs Alice Thomas Ellis’s narrative visions of Wales, but it can also be traced through poetic visions. Three prominent Welsh women poets discussed here are sympathetic to Catholicism (Gillian Clarke, Catherine Fisher and Hilary Llewellyn-Williams)

and within their poems can be read interesting parallels with Alice Thomas's Ellis's sense of Wales's 'vertical sense of tradition' (Ellis, *Wales Anthology* xiv) which endorses Yi-Fu Tuan's sense of mythical space as a 'vertical axis' (149). Catherine Fisher, a practising Catholic, presents contact zones in her poetry in which 'legendary and historical pasts [are] inscribed [...] on, in and between, the very features of the land itself' (Entwistle 25). Hilary Llewellyn-Williams, although a lapsed Catholic, states an interest in 'ancient precursors [of] and parallels to the Christian systems and symbols' (Llewellyn-Williams qtd. in Entwistle 25). Gillian Clarke, a Catholic 'who ceased to practise the religion [,] is far from being hostile to [Catholicism's] sacramental vision' (Hooker, *Imagining* 149). In the following discussion, I argue that all three poets are sympathetic to the notion of simultaneity, a notion which is central to the dogma of Catholicism and Christian mysticism, and thus engage with Welsh mythic goddesses as living entities which traverse liminal thresholds between natural and supernatural worlds.

Catherine Fisher's 'Blodeuwedd,' included in her *Altered States* collection (1999) and Gillian Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' (*Selected Poems* 1985) interrogate gender through the Welsh mythic character. However, in contrast to the poems discussed above Blodeuwedd is presented in reductive terms. Here we see Blodeuwedd as an excluded victim of an androcentric culture (Fisher) and as a victim of her own sin, to be pitied and ostracised, and not celebrated, or recovered (Clarke). Fisher's interrogation focuses upon issues of gender imbalances and does so with oblique reference to the destructive influence of colonisation. Unlike

Rose Flint's 'Green-Girl, Mill-Man,' however, there is no hope here for Blodeuwedd's reclamation of what has been colonised and effaced.

Through ventriloquism Catherine Fisher 'slips out of her own time- and gender-based contexts [in order to] bring myth and story into productive relation' (Entwistle 130). The poem is constructed over four stanzas and presented in the first person voice. The speaker, Blodeuwedd, asks:

What have you made of me, wizards?  
Out of me what have you formed? [...]   
The conditions that will cause death;  
how is it I know them all?' (Fisher, 'Blodeuwedd' 43).

Such direct questioning suggests an interrogation of the authority of a patriarchy's capacity to create women, although there is a slightly different tone to the questioning here compared with re-visions offered by the poems discussed above. Unlike a more positively cast Blodeuwedd, who embraces patriarchal rejection to make her banishment work for her own benefit (like Beagan's Blodeuwedd), Fisher's Blodeuwedd experiences the rejection negatively; as a flower-woman Blodeuwedd was made 'Treacherous' and as an owl she is a 'taloned hunter' but in both instances she has been 'mutated' (Fisher 'Blodeuwedd' 43).

This is reflected in Gillian Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' (*Selected Poems* 85). Jo Furber suggests: 'Clarke's work illustrates [...] the female poet's struggle for expression as many of her poems are written as revisionist accounts of the male-oriented myths and forms which have dominated Welsh culture' (146). A positivist reading is offered by Peach who argues: 'the emphasis in Clarke's poetry upon reclaiming and developing modes of signification with a feminine

rather than masculine orientation is not surprising given the distinctive, masculine orientation of much Welsh cultural myth' (93). However, presented within Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' is a complex interrogation of gender roles with a focus on female relationships. Clarke presents Blodeuwedd as a rule-breaker, as a terrorist, who is responsible for her own punishment. Blodeuwedd, even in owl form, instinctively acts unnaturally as 'Hours too soon a barn owl / broke from the woodshadow' (Clarke, 'Blodeuwedd' 43) and this is reflected in her exclusion as a non-being, a liminal half-breed. She is 'Colourless and soundless, [...] condemned / to the night, to lie alone / with her sin' (Clarke, 'Blodeuwedd' 43, 43). Clarke's owl-woman is not deplored because she is banished from the androcentric ruling centre, but because she is banished from the community of women.

Linden Peach argues that in Clarke's work, sisterhood and female alliances which cast women as 'soul mates' (91), are centrally placed in a woman's lived experience of her gender. Clarke's Blodeuwedd is:

Deprived too of afternoons  
in the comfortable sisterhood  
of women moving in kitchens  
among cups, cloths and running  
water while they talk. (Clarke, 'Blodeuwedd' 81)

She has excluded herself from this companionship when she acted selfishly and placed her own needs above those of her household. Reminiscent of Ellis's women, within the domesticated female space there is a power of self-expression, creativity and collaboration as the women fuse home craft with telling stories of their day: 'as we three talk tonight / [...] We pare and measure and stir, / heap



washed apples in a bowl, recall / the day's work, our own fidelities' (Clarke, 'Blodeuwedd' 81). The first person speaker, one of the 'three,' describes how the women work together, and share together, in their collective endeavour whilst Blodeuwedd 'is beyond conversation' and instead must commune with the non-human, with nature through her 'night lament' described as 'Blodeuwedd's ballad' (Clarke, 'Blodeuwedd' 81, 81, 81). Gillian Clarke presents Blodeuwedd as a transgressor who is to be pitied by those who enjoy the safety, comfort and nurturing offered by the boundaries often portrayed by feminist writers as binding and destructive to the female.

Male culpability does not appear here but that in itself implies a gynocentric approach to the Welsh myth source tale. M. Wynn Thomas argues: 'it is precisely this incorrigible impulse in [Gillian Clarke], when dealing with myth, both to give it a feminine inflection *and* to subsume gender difference' ('Place, Race and Gender' 7). I argue that Clarke implies a feminist approach to Welsh myth by indicating that Blodeuwedd does exercise autonomy and is responsible for her own self and her own choices, even as they reduce and damage her.

Thomas makes a similar, if conservative, point when he notes:

men are kept firmly out of the picture, not because Clarke is unaware of their crucial influence on the roles women play and the lives they lead, as is evident from the Blodeuwedd story, but because she does not believe that the plight of women can be attributed fully, or essentially, to 'patriarchal' influence. ('Place, Race and Gender' 6)

This puts Clarke in contention with feminist writers who have celebrated Blodeuwedd whilst turning a blind eye to her culpability, or who have acknowledged her malignancy on the one hand before excusing it as a reflection

of patriarchy's influence on the other (for example, this may be said of Zoe Brigley and Rose Flint's Blodeuwedd poems). Clarke's Blodeuwedd presents a different feminist reworking that interrogates Blodeuwedd as a multi-faceted being who acts on her own foibles and cruelties regardless of patriarchal influence.

Anna Lewis's 'Goewin' (*10 of the Best* 2011) provides an interesting revision of the Welsh source tale, especially as it can be read as a divergent response to Clarke's reworking of the Blodeuwedd myth and its focus on the domestic sphere.<sup>9</sup> It is the most recent poem analysed in this study and is the final poem in a sequence entitled, 'The Cord – Six Poems from the Mabinogion' (55 – 62). Containing six poems the sequence presents first-person perspectives from Arawn's wife and Teyrnon's wife (unnamed women from the First Branch of *The Mabinogi*), as well as Llwyd's wife (unnamed in the source) and Manawydan (both from the Third Branch of *The Mabinogi*). The final two poems give voice to Aranrhod and Goewin from the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*. Thus, this sequence signals how Welsh women poets who have consistently reworked Welsh source material as part of a feminist revision project, often through giving voice to silenced women in those narratives, have also neglected particular figures in the Welsh myth tales.

In Lewis's 'Goewin' the men of the source myth, Gwydion and Math, are the poem's focus, however, Goewin retains the poem's perspective as its first person speaker. In the source tale, Goewin is King Math's footholder who has been violently raped by Gwydion's brother (Gilfaethwy), with Gwydion aiding

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Penny Thomas for alerting me to the Parthian poetry collection *10 of the Best*. Ed. Lucy Llewellyn. Cardigan: Parthian, 2011.

him in the attack. Math forgives Gwydion his part in the rape and is welcomed back to court. Now Gwydion asks Math to help him create a wife for Lleu, and the pair work together to create Blodeuwedd from flowers. Blodeuwedd's creation is witnessed by Goewin. Unlike Nesta Wyn Jones and Hilary Llewellyn-Williams who cast Blodeuwedd as entirely responsible and in control of her own creation/transformation, here Math and Gwydion labour at the creation of the flower-woman. Like Catherine Fisher and Glenda Beagan's Blodeuwedd, she is unwillingly pulled from her flower state.

The act of creation is a messy and tiring job for the men as 'they take turns to pluck, thread and twist / until their hands slide with juices, // until, at last light, they coax a girl from carpels and stamens, / from sepals and slender petals' (A. Lewis 62). The male magicians weave a woman until, somewhat unwillingly, she 'stands naked between them, / skin sticky with sap, breasts still swelling from her chest' (A. Lewis 62). Such a creation places responsibility for Blodeuwedd's birth, nature and sexuality, entirely upon the men. Orgy-like sexual connotations, as well as birth imagery, are figured through their male dominance over Blodeuwedd and are central to the poem; Blodeuwedd stands naked between the two sticky and exhausted men, she too is sticky with juices after having been coaxed to partake in the realisation of their desires (not hers).

In direct contrast to Gillian Clarke's interrogation of the complexities of gender relationships, an interrogation which can be situated within the 1980s context of evolving feminist discourse, Anna Lewis presents a more radical feminist analysis of gender issues. Lewis directly uncovers misogyny at the heart of the source tale and holds it up for scrutiny in a somewhat less self-conscious

and questioning manner. Publishing her poem in 2011, 26 years after Gillian Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' and within an era that is arguably third-wave feminist, or even fourth-wave (Cochrane), Lewis has a quarter of a century (a generation, if you will, as Lewis was born in 1984) of feminist scholarship, discourse, and artistic creation to both engage with and scrutinise. Further, Lewis's sequence of six poems signals a shift in the revisionist activities of Welsh women poets who retell *The Mabinogi*. Like Gwyneth Lewis who acknowledges the influence of Gillian Clarke's poetry, which often focused upon domesticity whilst raising its profile as a serious poetic subject, I argue that Anna Lewis has been 'freed up' (G. Lewis qtd. in Entwistle 7) to look at other characters in *The Mabinogi* and to interrogate the domestic sphere as a reductive, if not brutal, sphere. This places Lewis in dialogue with wider feminist activities.

Lewis is able to build on foundations laid by Welsh women poets who have come before her thus allowing her to present a more confident engagement with feminist discourses. From a twenty-first-century perspective, she is able to draw out complexities in the stories of marginal characters. An example of this is her revisioning of the Blodeuwedd tale to include Goewin's commentary. Goewin has to present an outward appearance of forgiveness in compliance with her husband's wish to maintain a fraternal covenant with Gwydion. She says, 'He has made his peace with my husband. / They embrace in our hallway, / and I sit with them both at table' (A. Lewis 62). As Queen she must be courteous and hospitable to the man who abetted her rape. She watches as Gwydion and Math work together to manipulate another woman, Blodeuwedd, who has been 'pluck[ed], thread[ed] and twist[ed] [until] // She stands naked between them' (A. Lewis 62).

Here, then, Lewis flags up contemporary perceptions of sexual abusers/rapists. She points out that rape is a significant domestic abuse issue, often perpetrated by partners, friends and family members, and that women are conditioned to quietly accept such abuse when it occurs in their own homes and domestic settings.

By giving voice to Goewin, and not just Blodeuwedd, she uncovers the potential for male complicity in their abuse of a woman, and of multiple women. Furthermore, this poetic interrogation of the domestic space is ‘representative of an increasing willingness in [Welsh] women writers towards the end of the century to bear witness to [...] continuing oppression, which many women suffer’ (Gramich, *Twentieth* 170). The charity Welsh Women’s Aid reports that between April 2009 and March 2010, over twenty-thousand calls were made to the Wales Domestic Abuse Hotline. It states that in England and Wales, 54% of rapes are committed by a woman’s current or former partner and two women a week are killed by their partner, or ex-partner ([www.welshwomensaid.org.uk](http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk)). Published a year after such statistics were reported, Lewis’s ‘Gowein’ presents myth tales as ‘consolatory nonsenses’ (Carter, *Sadeian* 5) and signals a departure from Clarke’s domestic poems by uncovering the domestic realm as often destructive to individual women, and to communities of women.

Lewis’s poem ‘Goewin’ is a further example of how Lewis writes out of Welsh women’s poetic tradition in which writers have consistently engaged with Blodeuwedd. In that tradition, *The Mabinogi*’s Goewin has been neglected. Lewis frames Blodeuwedd’s creation through Goewin’s narration and so the poem participates in a developing canon of Blodeuwedd poems whilst providing fresh insight into the source material. In addition, metafictionally, readers in the twenty-

first century witness Blodeuwedd being conjured through twentieth-century poems, just like Lewis's observer, Goewin, witnesses her birth. Therefore when Lewis presents Goewin's view of Blodeuwedd's creation she transposes the view of contemporary readers with Goewin's. Ultimately, Lewis presents a re-telling of *The Mabinogi* in which two mythic Queens are framed at the same time and *both* women are figured as victims of wider misogynist regimes, regimes which penetrate to the heart of the domestic sphere.

### Mythic Goddesses: Rhiannon

In *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, Juliette Wood explores the socio-historical origins of primary Celtic goddesses, focussing her study on Irish and Welsh female deities. In the section in which the figure of Epona is analysed, Wood draws upon Rhiannon as a specifically Welsh 'version' of the Celtic horse goddess who variously appears within the wider Celtic myth tradition ('Celtic Goddesses' 118 – 136). Wood situates Rhiannon within a wider Celtic myth context and explains that 'Rhiannon's name is derived from Rigantona, meaning "Great Queen" in which the ending *-ona* indicates a divine being' (Wood, 'Celtic' 128).

Wood further suggests that 'the equine nature of the punishment is unique to the Welsh tales, but the incidents associated with Rhiannon are quite consistent with folk-tales told in many cultures' ('Celtic' 129). However, she further notes that Rhiannon's punishments are 'usually seen in the context of surviving Celtic myth about a horse goddess, Epona, although nothing is known directly of such a myth' ('The Horse' 168). This signals two significant features of Rhiannon's role

within Welsh mythology and, by extrapolation, Welsh culture. Rhiannon is both goddess and every-woman. It is this ambiguity that leads Wood to conclude that a clear definition of 'Rhiannon [...] still eludes modern scholars' ('Celtic' 129). The following discussion of Christine Furnival's 'Rhiannon' (1978), and Elin ap Hywel's poems 'Disarming' and 'Stitching' (2002), explores how Welsh women poets draw upon the ambiguities associated with the figure of Rhiannon and utilise her protean and often contradictory nature to comment on gender, nationhood and the function of Welsh mythology.

Christine Furnival's 'Rhiannon' interrogates the character of Rhiannon by accentuating her humanity in the face of crises, as she takes each incident 'in her generous stride' and rises 'with a smile, to homelessness and some malign / enchantments' (22). The poem laments that the 'old stories [...] do not always tell of [...] rare, important – even royal – top / persons': 'Rhiannon / was such a lady' (Furnival 22) often omitted from them. The power of the 'old stories' is made more potent when they do relate the triumphs and tribulations of such characters as Rhiannon; thus they become more 'refreshing and good' (Furnival 22). Here, Furnival examines the place of those stories within the wider context of the myth corpus. Rhiannon is held up as an example of how impressive the stories are when they impart the more common, or every day, experiences of 'rare, important [...] top / persons' (Furnival 22). Furnival is engaged with a wider tradition of women's rewriting of mythic narratives, not simply by telling an androcentric misogynist myth tale from a first-person female perspective. By participating in a wider feminist questioning of power paradigms which venerate one type of

narrative whilst dismissing another, she unsettles ‘the kinds of truth-claims associated with the masculine discourse of myth’ (Purkiss 449).

Elin ap Hywel’s ‘Disarming’ and ‘Stitching’, both feature a first-person speaker and focus on individual voice rather than considering the place of an individual story within a wider collective context. Rhiannon, in ap Hwyl’s ‘Disarming’, taken from a sequence of poems based on the First Branch of *The Mabinogi*, describes Rhiannon’s thoughts as she sits by the entrance to Pwyll’s court (18). Here, the physical process of disarming Pwyll suggests an emotional engagement with the handling of weaponry and armour as ‘Removing his armour: the best ritual of all’ (ap Hywel, ‘Disarming’ 18). Only at the fourth line is it clear that the first-person voice is responsible for the disarming, for the physical and emotional, and possibly sensual, connection involved in the act; she strips him ‘to the last greave, where my hand lies / in the chink between metal and flesh’ (ap Hywel, ‘Disarming’ 18). The ambiguity associated with Rhiannon is apparent here. Rhiannon strips the man before her of his identity, formed by defensive outer layers of steel, removing them layer by layer, meaning by meaning, and in doing so reveals not only the physicality of him but also his individualism and his vulnerability as an individual.

Ap Hywel explores the concept of transcending limits and boundaries in her ‘Stitching’, another poem from her Rhiannon sequence, but this poem focuses on the moment when Rhiannon meets Pwyll. In this reworking of a Welsh myth tale the function of storytelling, and its ability to reach across boundaries, is examined through the metaphor of tapestry as Rhiannon weaves a story using words and cotton.



The poem opens with an unravelling of cotton which frames the literal woven image, and of the memory which frames the past event. Rhiannon laments this unravelling: 'The framing borders fray. I remember / a day of white and yellow, air and gold' (ap Hywel, 'Stitching' 66). Ap Hywel's Rhiannon creates a visual representation of herself through her needlework, but also images her selfhood and her story. These are further elucidated through their poetic imagining via the written word. She recalls:

A meadow, flowers, birds. The greensward silk.  
An unseen hand stitched in me and the horse.  
I felt the needle piercing my heart.  
Embroidering the last curl in my mare's tail,  
it caught us there in a shining web of threads. (ap Hywel, 'Stitching' 66)

Memory and myth narrative act as repositories of collective memory and are figured as being woven, by 'an unseen hand' (ap Hywel, 'Stitching' 66). This also recalls that weaving is a female occupation and, as I have shown, is linked to women's poetic traditions and folkloric traditions.

Ap Hywel's 'Stitching' reevaluates 'social, political, and philosophical values' (Ostriker 331) where historicity and the passing of linear time are interrogated as a male construct (like its grand narratives of patriarchal myth), meaning that for such women revisionists of myth, 'past and present are, for better or worse, essentially the same' (Ostriker 331). This flattening of space and time is figured within ap Hywel's 'Stitching', where voices, narratives, existences, can breach the accepted boundaries of space and time – in this way Rhiannon can reclaim her story by 'stepping out' of it (ap Hywel, 'Stitching' 66).

### Mythic Goddesses: Branwen and Olwen

M. Wynn Thomas suggests that Gillian Clarke's 'impulse [...] when dealing with myth, is both to give it a feminine inflection *and* to subsume gender difference within what, for her, remains the overriding, primary, category of the undifferentiatedly "human"' ('Place, Race and Gender' 7). Clarke's concern with gender difference and androgynous humanity is exemplified in her collection, *The King of Britain's Daughter* (1993). Taking as its inspiration the source tale of Bran and Branwen, the collection weaves lyric, mythic and sonnet poetic forms to present the speaker's childhood memories of growing up in the locale of Pembrokeshire, where the events of the Second Branch of *The Mabinogi* are thought to have occurred. Thus the speaker shares the same space as the mythic characters.

Clarke's Wales is described by Alice Entwistle as 'multiplicitous [and] multidimensional' (4) and Entwistle draws upon the spatial theories of Doreen Massey to argue that women's poetry, specifically Clarke's poetry, 'imagines a space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey qtd. in Entwistle 1). When Gillian Clarke engages with Welsh myth and maps that myth onto Welsh landscapes she is traversing 'a kind of creative space [...] surreptitiously lay[ing] claim to an oral and patriarchal "Celtic" imaginary' (Entwistle 119). References to *The Mabinogi* thread throughout Clarke's poetry collection; sometimes obliquely and sometimes with explicit correlations. Sub-textual references are found, for example, in features of the landscape such as 'Bendigeidfran's stone', a 'slingstone of Bran's rage against Ireland' (Clarke, 'The King' 1).

Consisting of six poems, the section '*Branwen's Songs and the Lament of Bendigeidfran*' relates the narrative of the Second Branch primarily from Branwen's first-person perspective, and thus the poems form her 'songs'. The last stanza of the four central poems has a different voice, that of Bendigeidfran, and makes up his lament which is italicised throughout. Therefore the section is framed by Branwen's account. Communication, within the sequence, is figured as an interrogation of the ways in which humanity communes with nature and the natural landscape.

In the second poem, Branwen's communication with nature is presented through pathetic fallacy, as an intuition, and as a subconscious awareness of nature: 'I wake suddenly in the dark / as if the world lurched, to hear / in the perpetual sound of waves / an outcry and the growl of war' (Clarke, 'The King' 13). Here is one of Clarke's 'vision[s] of a suffering landscape [where] sensuousness is balanced by the (equally bodily) suffering and death' (Jarvis 50). Nature's waves have foreshadowed the oncoming war, of 'great flares [...] burning far away / in [her] drowned country' (Clarke, 'The King' 13). Nature mimics Branwen's distress at her abuse and in its own way communicates its displeasure through an 'outcry' and 'growl of war'. Branwen and Bendigeidfran share an intersubjective bond that incorporates nature and nation, so that the earth quakes as a retribution for Branwen's suffering, but its perturbations are also an effect of the giant Bendigeidfran's churning of the sea as he paces the shoreline of Wales, psychically aware of his sister's torture. Bran's voice in the italicised lament expresses violent rage: '*Oh, my face is salt, / My anger the flung sea ./ Under my*

*fist the waves are wild swans / Beating out of black mountain lakes / The spume flies up before my thighs*' (Clarke, 'The King' 13).

Within the source tale political relations between Ireland and Wales come to the fore where the tale pivots upon modes of honour and respect between nations; Irish honour is slighted and Matholwch as godhead of Ireland demands recompense. For Juliette Wood, *The Mabinogi's* Branwen is a calumniated wife who is 'clearly the victim of a wider xenophobia [...] and her part in the destruction of Wales and Ireland emphasizes her pivotal role in the relationship between the two countries' ('The Calumniated Wife' 29, 32). Alice Entwistle notes that as 'a persistent presence in Clarke's oeuvre, the sea offers perhaps the simplest way of dramatising the cultural relationship between Ireland and Wales' (120). In this section of the sequence even nature, through littoral imagery, declares war in answer to Matholwch's malicious treatment of the Welsh princess, Branwen.

In Bendigeidfran's lament, which forms the last stanza of poems two to five inclusively, this correlation between self, nature and nation takes on another dimension. The concept of familial belonging and psychic communication between family members, implied in the source tale is foregrounded by Clarke. In their analysis of *The King of Britain's Daughter*, Gramich (*Twentieth* 149), Hooker (*Imagining* 157), Entwistle (122) and M. Wynn Thomas (*Corresponding* 194) all focus upon Bendigeidfran reflecting the paternal influence of Clarke's father. Looking at the poem's internal features, I focus upon Bran and Branwen's psychical bond as twins: Clarke often presents Branwen's voice as 'entwined with her twin's' (Entwistle 123).

As in Kate D'Lima's short story 'Branwen', a secret language bonds Bran and Branwen. Telepathic exchange between Clarke's Bendigeidfran and Branwen is symbolised through nature, but it is also a literal mode of communication in both the source material and Clarke's reworking. Bendigeidfran says: '*I bridle the currents, wear the sea's cold iron / for armoury [...] / and set out through the sea to Ireland, / taking the west wind to my heart like grief*' (Clarke, 'The King' 15), whilst Branwen replies: 'When he hears my name / he comes as a black crow, / [...] brother with a starling, / cupped in his nesting hands' (Clarke, 'The King' 16). Branwen's starling becomes an 'intermediary, [it] affords her voice and freedom' (Entwistle 124), but 'the shadows [of war] suggest impending sorrow and grief' (Gramich, *Twentieth* 150). Branwen recounts that:

Day after day  
a starling comes to my hand,  
both of us small birds at a window  
[...]

and I tell my name until  
he holds its two syllables  
of water in his throat  
two pearls to bear across the sea. (Clarke, 'The King' 14)

The bird, representing the natural world, becomes the messenger by which Branwen communicates with her brother and that communication itself is symbolised as water, another natural element. Clarke's Bendigeidfran and Branwen draw out the source tale's oblique intermingling of nature, nation, self and myth where the twins, as mythic beings who are male and female and absolute equals, personify Welsh nature and nation.

Sibling love, communication, nationhood and nature are dominant themes throughout the sequence. Welsh mythology is the medium through which Clarke promulgates ideas of connectivity, kinship and anthropomorphism. Giving voice to the character of Branwen, within which is subsumed that of her brother, and framing that voice within a collection that presents memories of a twentieth-century childhood, Clarke suggests that such preoccupations as bonds between family, humans, nature and nationhood are eternal: they are eternally bound together and, as poets such as Hilary Llewellyn-Williams and Elin ap Hywel have similarly suggested, can instigate a rupturing of past into present.

Turning to another of Gillian Clarke's poems there is further interrogation of the relationship between language and mythology, an interrogation which now encompasses technology as well. Clarke's 'Olwen Takes Her First Steps on the Word Processor in Time of War' presents a young woman who sits at an early model word processor, which features a black screen and white typeface and font:

Her first, tentative step into the dark  
 deep as the void, first stone cast into nothing.  
 'Is anyone there?' Then the slow waiting.  
 for a language like her own, a spark

that tells her something's there. (Clarke, 'Olwen' 44)

The poem features in the latter half of Clarke's *The King of Britain's Daughter* (1993) and explores a writer's attempt to compose poetry using a computer's keyboard, but who becomes anxious that the technology is counterpoised to her creative imaginary. She soon finds her inspiration figured as the mythic goddess Olwen, a recuperating Muse.

M. Wynn Thomas states that ‘myth is irreducibly multiform in structure and meaning, and is employed by Clarke [...] because she wants to explore, in the very act of expressing, an intricate nexus of experiences’ (*Corresponding* 196). It is this ‘act of expressing’ which comes to the fore in ‘Olwen’ as the speaker ‘takes another step across the abyss / and listens. Ticking like trodden ice / her small words skitter the black sky with stars’ (Clarke, ‘Olwen’ 44).

Taken from the same collection as the Branwen sequence (*The King of Britain’s Daughter*), the poem draws upon the Welsh princess Olwen, featured in the later *Mabinogion* tale, ‘How Culhwch Won Olwen’ (S. Davies 179 – 213). Olwen is the daughter of the chief giant Ysbaddaden Bencawr who sets a series of seemingly impossible tasks for her suitor Culhwch to complete. Olwen, whose name is literally translated in English as ‘white trace’ or ‘white mark left behind,’ walks with bare feet and where she leaves footprints, white flowers immediately grow up. Culhwch completes the tasks which results in the death of Ysbaddaden Bencawr. Culhwch and Olwen are then able to marry. Clarke’s focus here is on the correlation between poetic inspiration, storytelling and a woman’s reclamation of both. Again Clarke has turned to Welsh mythology and Welsh women within that mythology in order to interrogate such concerns.

Technology is figured as the medium through which an artist conveys their creativity and thus, to a certain extent, it replaces nature as a mode of conveyance. However, there is apprehension about how this relationship could become distorted through technological interference:

All trace of bird and fox on snowy land  
 deleted; the guns of winter crack the lonely screen  
 at start of day, and where her touch has been  
 snowdrops come springing from the sodden ground. (Clarke, 'Olwen' 44)

Clarke presents a symbiosis of technology and nature whereby the experience of interacting with technology is figured through allusion to, and metaphoric encounters with, the natural world. It is also a medium through which a poet may translate her experience as a woman, as a woman writer, and as a Welsh woman writer. In her essay 'Beginning with Bendigeidfran' (*Our Sister's Land* 1994) Clarke states 'that being a woman and being Welsh are inescapably expressed in the art of poetry' to which she adds that tales from *The Mabinogi* 'offered [her] a place in myth, and gave myth and naming a place in [her] imagination' (288, 289). By scribing digital marks via a keyboard across a blank screen Clarke is making Welsh women's experience visible within a digitalised twentieth-century context. This chimes with Gwyneth Lewis's imaginative impulse, as stated in the afterword to her novella *The Meat Tree* (2010), discussed in the next chapter. Lewis reveals how, for her, 'poetry itself is one of the earliest technologies' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 252).

Olwen, as a mythic princess and as a twentieth-century woman sitting at a computer, represents a collapsing of space and time in creating a gynocentric poetic legacy. Hooker argues that 'Clarke's validation of women's experience as a subject for poetry should be understood [...] in relation to social history' (*Imagining* 147) in which Welsh women have been culturally invisible. In addition, I argue that just as 'Clarke's imaginative traversing of the gulf dividing Ireland from Wales might be argued to have helped free her into poetic articulacy'



(Entwistle 124), her traversing the divide between digital and poetic expression has also freed her bardic articulacy.

In Clarke's poem, Olwen takes her 'first steps' in 'time of war' and thus signals the destructive influence of technology, hence her initial anxiety. Clarke's thematic interest in war can be traced through *The King of Britain's Daughter* which includes biographical details of her evacuation during the Second World War as well as meditation on mythic war between Ireland and Wales. Katie Gramich notes this tension between the natural world and technological war machines in the work of Welsh female poets who produce anti-war poetry. Gramich states that 'the focus on the personal and intimate challenges the tendency of the war machine to depersonalize and even dehumanize' (*Twentieth* 179). Gramich draws upon Gillian Clarke's work as an example of such an interrogation of technology's function in personal and political spheres. With constant advancements in nuclear armament and nuclear power, Clarke's poem can be read as a protest against war and the technology designed to maim and annihilate. For Olwen, then, tension arises from technology's capacity to create and its capacity to destroy.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Welsh women poets have turned to Welsh mythology, and Welsh goddesses within those myth tales, in order to convey their exploration of selfhood as well as Welsh nationhood. Welsh mythology and its queens have proven to be extremely fruitful in this regard and that fact in itself

provides an interesting comment upon the malleability and endurance of the Welsh myth tales.

Within the poetic responses to Welsh myth there is a consistent focus on Blodeuwedd. By re-visioning her through their lyric poetry Welsh women poets have provided her with a first-person voice which delineates not only the facts of her transformation, but also her shifting emotional states and attitudes towards such transformations. From poem to poem her voice shifts from melancholy, to contemptuous, to derisive, to matter-of-fact, to exultant. Where there is a third-person account, such as in Clarke's 'Blodeuwedd' there is a focus on how Blodeuwedd's punishment functions to distance and exclude her from humanity. In Lewis's 'Goewin', the first-person voice belongs to Goewin and it articulates the home as a site of domestic abuse: thus Lewis evolves Clarke's focus on the domestic to include twenty-first-century concepts of home and hearth, concepts based on feminism's steady uncovering of women's abuse in the home.

Blodeuwedd is often celebrated as a paragon of female freedom and Welsh women poets have drawn upon her to interrogate patriarchal influences upon, and abuses of, women. Likewise there have been complex poetic re-workings of Rhiannon, Branwen and Olwen which make problematic a straightforward reading of gender imbalances, especially when their revisions have queried gynocritical binaries of men/aggressors and women/victims.

Such poetic interrogations are cognate with the wider Welsh women's literary output during the closing decades of the twentieth century. Use of the lyrical first-person voice in the poems discussed in this chapter situates them in dialogue with other Welsh women writers, such as Trezza Azzopardi, Siân James,

Rachel Tresize, and Clare Morgan, who are concerned with representing ‘the experiences of female characters who have been rendered voiceless in society’ (Gramich, *Twentieth* 169). Welsh women poets, drawing upon Welsh mythic goddesses as the subject of their poetry, have given voice to the voiceless women of Wales and have uncovered Welsh patriarchal systems so as to advance equality in Welsh women’s lived experiences of nation and gender. They have revealed lines of maternal heritage in poetic, folkloric and mythic traditions and have cast new tellings within those traditions. Such activities are in dialogue with wider feminist writing activities that seek to uncover, address and rebalance inequalities within all storytelling traditions and their associated wider socio-cultural paradigms. The Welsh women poets discussed within this chapter participate in these activities but do so from within an entirely *Welsh* context.

## CHAPTER SIX: Welsh Myth in Gwyneth Lewis's *The Meat Tree*

### Introduction

In 2006, during a team meeting at the Welsh publishing house, Seren, commissioning editors discussed the recent success of Canongate's published series of retold world myths. First appearing in 2005, the Scottish series included contributions from such writers as Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Ali Smith, Philip Pullman, Sally Vickers, A.S. Byatt, and Alexander McCall Smith. After identifying the omission of Welsh tales within that series, the Seren editors hit upon the idea of inviting Welsh writers to re-imagine the Welsh myth tales of *The Mabinogion* (P. Thomas 'Personal interview'). Series editor, Penny Thomas, approached authors to write for Seren's New Stories from *The Mabinogion* Series and those who agreed were given a free creative rein so that variety was encouraged. Seren's only stipulations were that the re-telling would be a novella and the first authors had to select a source tale. Those commissioned for the later launches chose from the remaining source tales (P. Thomas 'Personal interview').

Seren's marketing blurb states that:

New Stories from *The Mabinogion* gives leading Welsh authors the chance to retell these medieval stories of Celtic mythology and Arthurian Britain in entirely their own way, creating fresh, contemporary novellas while keeping the old tales at the heart of the new. ([www.seren](http://www.seren.org.uk))

Ten novellas were commissioned, published in pairs over five years, with the first pair appearing in 2009. *White Ravens* by Owen Sheers and *The Ninth Wave* by Russell Celyn Jones in 2009 were followed in 2010 by Gwyneth Lewis's *The Meat Tree* and *The Dreams of Max and Ronnie* by Niall Griffiths. In 2011, Fflur Dafydd's *The White Trail* and Horatio Clare's *The Prince's Pen* were launched, and in 2012 Lloyd Jones's *See How They Run* and Cynan Jones's *Bird, Blood, Snow* appeared as the penultimate pairing. Trezza Azzopardi's *The Tip of My Tongue* and Tishani Doshi's *Fountainville* were published, as the last pair, in 2013 and a close reading of this pairing is found in chapter seven.

The treatment of time and contemporary wars and conflicts seems to be the series' overarching themes. Penny Thomas states that it was by chance that the first re-tellings took the First and Second Branches as source tales, and some authors were happy for their re-tellings to feature a synopsis of the source tale and an afterword which explored their processes in engaging with the source tale (P. Thomas 'Personal interview'). Out of ten re-tellings there are four by women in the list, but Penny Thomas states that this gender imbalance was not intentional as authors of both genders turned down Seren's offer of a commission (P. Thomas 'Personal interview'). Seren proceeded with authors who assented.

The Welsh Books Council financially supported the series, which was pitched at a Welsh, British and international audience. Through the series, Seren aimed to showcase talents of individual Welsh authors who have British and international readership, drawing them on to Seren's publishing list and raising the profile of Welsh Writing in English, as well as the Welsh publishing sector. Another aim was to introduce and re-engage a wider readership with Welsh

culture, with Seren being keen to re-present the tales as a Welsh myth cycle.

Cathryn A. Charnell-White notes, however, of the series:

Considering the cultural currency of the Mabinogion, I find it revealing of a confident post-devolution Wales that so few contributors to the series have foregrounded national identity and that none have resorted to the all-too-easy nationalistic pietas towards the source texts. [Creative] reinterpretation of these classic Welsh texts can confront us with new truths of our present, and with possibilities for the future. (95)

Seren's New Stories from *The Mabinogion* series is different from Honno Classics and the Library of Wales series. The latter series comprises reprints and recoveries of neglected narratives and authors, whereas the Seren series recovers Welsh mythology and its constituent source tales through new tellings.

Seren's New Stories from *The Mabinogion* Series has yet to receive critical attention from Welsh literary and myth scholars, apart from reviews of individual texts as they have appeared. Chapters six and seven of this thesis therefore constitute one of the first critical engagements with the Welsh women writers who have contributed to the series. These mythic re-tellings of *The Mabinogion* by Gwyneth Lewis, Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi, and Tishani Doshi are located within the tradition of Welsh writing in English, feminism, and wider myths. In Lewis's novella, *The Meat Tree*, nationhood and gender identities are constructed and re-constructed with such integration signalling forward to Dafydd's *The White Trail*, Azzopardi's *The Tip of My Tongue* and Doshi's *Fountainville*.

As a multi-award winning poet, in both languages of Wales, and the National Poet of Wales (2005), Gwyneth Lewis was an obvious and important

choice for the series. Lewis is a first-language Welsh speaker, born in 1959 and raised in Cardiff where she still resides (G. Lewis, 'Whose coat is that jacket?' 12). She won the literature medal in the Urdd Eisteddfod in 1977 for the volume *Llwybrau Bywyd* (in English, *Life Passages*) and in 1978 for the collection *Ar y Groesffordd* (in English, *On the Crossroad*), placing her 'firmly within a distinct literary lineage' (N. Williams 'Gwyneth Lewis' 24, 25). Lewis has published award-winning collections, in both languages of Wales, since her first collection *Sonedau Redsa* was published, in Welsh, in 1990. She publishes collections alternately in Welsh and English, with eight collections to date, and has written fiction and non-fiction prose texts, two plays, two chamber operas and an oratorio ([www.gwynethlewis.com](http://www.gwynethlewis.com)). Amongst many prestigious literary awards and scholarly accolades, Lewis was honoured as Wales's National Poet 2005 – 2006 and won the Crown at the National Eisteddfod in 2012. From her earliest career as a poet, as the titles of her first prize poems – *Life Passages* and *On the Crossroad* – suggest, borders, boundaries, hybridities, and liminalities and journeys inform Lewis's writing.

The following argument suggests that this goes deeper than a thematic interest, as such concern with hybridities engages not only with the function of poetry as means of interpreting the world, but engages with the essence of mythic and poetic imagination. In this respect, the following discussion also explores how technology becomes vital in new modes of poetic interpretation and thus in the continued existence of poetry and myth into the second millennium, and beyond.

*The Meat Tree* (2010) indicates a point of convergence for a number of Lewis's conceptual and thematic concerns. For instance, her work makes an

architectural poem of the Wales Millennium Centre with her specially commissioned words in Welsh and English lit up across the frontage of the building – a beacon of Wales, in both languages. Entwistle notes that ‘materially speaking they comprise a giant poem-window [...] the poem is a threshold: it stands, liminally, between the domains it spans, linking and separating seen and unseen’ (xv). This liminality which links seen and unseen worlds is key to *The Meat Tree*’s exploration of transubstantiation in the source tale of Lleu and Blodeuwedd. Nerys Williams’s discussion of Lewis’s *Two in a Boat* (2005), which chronicles a five-year sea journey with her husband provides an elucidating insight into the form of Lewis’s later retelling of *The Mabinogi*. Williams argues that *Two in a Boat* is an ‘ambitious examination of the relationship between a documentary impulse and the practice of poetry’ (N. Williams ‘Gwyneth Lewis’ 25). I suggest that such ‘impulse’ and ‘practice’ further coalesce in *The Meat Tree*’s science fiction account of a man and a woman on an archaeological space exploration, journeying together in a spaceship whilst logging their experiences and discoveries.

Furthermore, throughout her poetry, Lewis consistently returns to an interrogation of the relationship between imagination and flesh. She has said of her writing methods, ‘The reason I work beyond all reason at poems is in the hope of reaching someone else’s mind’ ([www.gwynethlewis.com](http://www.gwynethlewis.com)). Grahame Davies argues that Lewis’s poetry demonstrates a ‘convergence [of] creativity [at an] intersection of the realms of flesh and spirit’ (G. Davies, ‘Review: *Keeping Mum*’ 66, 67), whilst Gramich notes how Lewis ‘yokes together apparently disparate worlds’ (*Twentieth* 186). *The Meat Tree* draws on the tale of Lleu and



Blodeuwedd who are both transmuted from one bodily form into another: Blodeuwedd from flowers to human to bird, and Lleu from human to bird and back again. Using science fiction tropes, Lewis retells this tale of metamorphosis by blurring distinctions between meat and imagination, flesh and spirit.

By locating her reimagining of Welsh myth in a technologised future world, Lewis also explores another of her thematic concerns, that of the relationship between science and language. Discussing this concern in *Poetry Review* (1995), Lewis states that ‘verse is a version of nerve-end responses to the world, filtered through the logarithm of language into a construct which is equivalent, in some way, to that original experience’ (G. Lewis, ‘Whose coat is that jacket?’ 16). Communication through scientific mediums is foreground throughout *The Meat Tree* with the narrators recounting the novella’s entire action through dialogue (transmitted via a direct mind-to-mind synapse link) and in first-person voices.

In the following discussion, I argue that *The Meat Tree*, with its engagement with its Welsh myth source tale of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, is a culmination of Lewis’s concerns with liminality, with chronicling life as a pilgrim’s journey of discovery, and of the inadequacy of language to communicate literal, metaphoric and spiritual odysseys. The result is a requirement to draw upon all modes of language to elucidate a ‘desire for a unity between word and object [so that] signifiers and signifieds are melded together’ (N. Williams ‘Gwyneth Lewis’ 25). For Lewis, science provides lexical sets which offer a fresh reading of the world, humanity’s passage through the world, and humanity’s articulation of that journey.

Lewis's *The Meat Tree* is a science fiction novella that records the empirical study of a wrecked spaceship that has been drawn into Mars's outer satellite orbit. Welsh myth has travelled with human explorers through time and space, into the twenty-third century, and exists in the present, in them, in their inter-planetary culture and society. I argue that in *The Meat Tree* Welsh myth has survived its journey through space and time and thus exists as a continually evolving psychical chimera. Lewis's work, for Entwistle, demonstrates how 'real and imaginary intensify, fuse with and come to transform each other: the "magic" in which the realms of the intensely personal, both physical [...] and interior [...] are rendered transfiguringly "new" (94). Within Lewis's prose engagement with a Welsh mythic narrative, the original myth tale is reworked so as to tease out its latent themes and motifs which are then transfigured anew and presented in a way that suits Lewis's 'code [...] of being a writer' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 253).

In *The Meat Tree*, Lewis presents 'science, as a careful description of the world, [as] a huge source of poetic images' (G. Lewis qtd. in Poole 28); from its perspective she interrogates Welsh myth as a site of convergence, assimilation and liminality. This accords with Angela Carter's view of myth and technology, where she states:

Now we have machines to do our dreaming for us. But within that 'video gadgetry' might lie the source of a continuation, even a transformation, of storytelling and story performance. The human imagination is infinitely resilient, surviving colonization, transportation, involuntary servitude, imprisonment, bans on language, the oppression of women. ('Introduction' xxi)

Within *The Meat Tree* technology, myth and poetry commingle so that collective and individual imaginaries share and evolve myth narratives through new, technological, mediums. As I argued in chapter five, poets such as Gillian Clarke and Menna Elfyn were presented as opening up creative spaces so that other Welsh women poets can look outwards, beyond domesticity (Lewis qtd. in Entwistle 7). In his critique of how Elfyn's work opens up such creative space, M. Wynn Thomas notes that because the 'vocabulary and conventions of traditional elegy are of [...] little immediate use [...] to her [new] psycho-poetic strategies have to be developed' (*Corresponding* 208). He suggests that one of Elfyn's strategies was based on her discovery 'that botanic and biological metaphors "naturally" present themselves under circumstances where an attachment to an organism has made her sharply aware of her own being' (*Corresponding* 208). Lewis also develops new poetic strategies to elucidate new states of being and thinking, or to interrogate established modes of being and thinking in new ways. Fusions of myth, poetry, flesh and science are crucial to an understanding of Lewis's *The Meat Tree*; she states in its 'Afterword' that 'every writer is a meat tree of sorts' (G. Lewis 252). Myths are poetically figured when both myth and poetry combine as a timeless, universal language which is conveyed through time and space. This *ur*-language continuously evolves by assimilating new myths, new narratives and new poetic forms.

### *The Meat Tree* (2010)

*The Meat Tree* is situated in the year 2210, and is narrated in alternating first-person voices by the Inspector of Wrecks (Campion) who is undertaking his last

research field investigation before he retires, and his student assistant (Nona) who has yet to finish her research qualification – the research trip on to the wreck forming part of her certification. In addition to the first person accounts, recorded via the Synapse Log (a thought recorder that acts as a personal journal), the Joint Thought Channel allows for telepathic dialogue between Campion and Nona – this communication is indicated by italicised print. The Joint Thought Channel is *‘not a silent version of speaking out loud, but it’s a way of sharing two sets of sense impressions from slightly different angles [in order] to make a very precise running commentary’* (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 18).<sup>10</sup> Both the Synapse Log and the Joint Thought Channel are given headers to differentiate between narrative modes, until a point is reached when the boundaries between the narratorial viewpoints become blurred as, indeed, the boundaries between all defined notions and entities bleed into one another.

Much of the action in this text occurs within the imagination of Campion and Nona as they both participate in the Virtual Reality (VR) programme aboard the abandoned spaceship. They surmise its Earth origins because of the lack of explanatory physical evidence to account for its state of abandonment. Hence, they seek answers in the onboard VR game. Once engaged with the VR programme they are drawn further into its mythic narrative until they participate in its action telepathically, without the use of helmets, visor-screens or glove-controls. The spaceship/VR assimilates their minds and begins to consume their bodies. Nona and Campion realise their peril, but it is too late for both of them to

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<sup>10</sup> Italics as in the original unless otherwise stated. Lewis uses italics to denote the difference between thought modes (Synapse Log/first person and Joint Thought Channel/dialogue).

escape. Nona distracts the ship by offering herself as a sacrifice, allowing Campion to jettison to safety.

The novella's plot and narrative arc assimilate elements of crime fiction, notably Lewis's naming of her male protagonist Campion, an echoing of Margery Allingham's detective, Albert Campion. Entwistle comments on crime fiction motifs within Lewis's poetry, suggesting that

the synecdochic trope of detection, and its cognates – crime, villain, victim, detective, and the collection and processing of evidence and clues [...] are everywhere in play in Lewis's work. [...] [But] the clues and codes inscribed in her texts prove endlessly and powerfully contingent. (104)

Within *The Meat Tree* a trace of detective fiction can be located in the figure of a researcher and his assistant undertaking interstellar archaeology, whereby they try to decipher the fate of an abandoned spaceship's crew based on clues they left behind. Intertextuality can also be traced, etymologically, through the naming of Nona and Campion, a point to which I will return.

Lewis neatly summarises the plot of the Fourth Branch arguing:

Although much of the Fourth Branch is taken up with the rites of passage which Lleu requires in order to become a man, the main character of the story is Gwydion, his uncle. Gwydion is not only a wizard but also a storyteller. The early parts of the myth are devoted to his education. After he helps his brother [Gilfaethwy] commit rape, their brother, Math, punishes them both. The penance is to be changed into animals and be forced to breed with each other and bear young. Gwydion is to learn literally what it is to behave like an animal. (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 251)

In addition to the 'rape, incest, bestiality, miracle births and murder' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 250) and the shape-shifting between human and animal, the Branch

also includes the tale of the creation of Blodeuwedd to be the wife of Lleu, Gwydion's nephew/son; she is cursed to be not '*from the race that is on [...] earth at present*' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 151). To negate the curse Gwydion and Math combine their imaginative and magical powers to create a non-human woman, born of two fathers and flowers. They name her Blodeuwedd and gift her to Lleu. Blodeuwedd takes a lover, Gronw Pebyr, with whom she plots to murder Lleu. When Lleu is attacked he is not killed but is, through an enchantment cast by Gwydion, transformed into an eagle which flies away. As punishment Blodeuwedd is turned into an owl by Gwydion and Math, and Gronw Pebyr is killed by Lleu when he is returned to human form (S. Davies 47 – 64).

The title of Lewis's text refers to the place where Lleu convalesces in his avian form; he has taken refuge in a tree: 'the tree is flush with scarlet and deep gold leaves and yes, they fall, but with them are meat and maggots' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 212). Lewis writes 'These falling gobbets of flesh are Lleu's flowers. Just as Math and [Gwydion] created Blodeuwedd, caused blossoms to become flesh, now Lleu is flowering into meat' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 213). This discussion suggests that the meat tree, as a motif, ultimately signifies Lewis's exploration of the symbiosis of the plant and animal worlds, of nature and humanity, and ultimately of body and mind. Lewis utilises the motif to pose the poetic imagination as predatory as well as generative (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 253); poets are carnal beings, and all poetry belongs to a family tree.

*The Mabinogi* often includes onomastic tags (S. Davies xv) in the naming of its characters and Lewis draws on this tradition in her reworking of the Blodeuwedd tale, a narrative in which flowers feature significantly. Campion, for

example, is a flowering plant; its latin name is *Silene Diocia*. *Silene* is a form of *Silenus*, the Greek satyr and woodland god who was ‘exceptionally wise, but had to be forced to reveal this wisdom to men’ (Grimal 401). Red Campion has idiosyncratic botanic characteristics, particularly in regard to reproduction and cross-fertilisation. Its specific ecology means that:

when White Campion grows alongside Red Campion it will often hybridise, the resulting cross bears pink flowers as might be expected. Unlike many hybrids, the plant is completely fertile and will often hybridise with members of the parent strains. This is called backcrossing. When it occurs, all shades of colour from red through pink to pure white can be found, and it is often difficult to tell which plants are the original Red and White Campions.  
([www.oldknobbly.com/woodland\\_ecology/plants/wildflower\\_campion\\_red](http://www.oldknobbly.com/woodland_ecology/plants/wildflower_campion_red))

Additionally, both Red and White Campion produce a type of foam which is used to trap pollen so as to aid the germination process. In myth, Graves notes how Red Campion’s name in rural areas is ‘Red Champion’, which is associated with Robin Hood, and in turn ‘mythologically equated with Robin [...] the red-breast’ (397, 397). As we have seen in chapter three, in relation to Alice Thomas Ellis’s *The Birds of the Air*, the name Robin is linked to Jesus Christ. Here then, Red Campion is also connotative of Christ and Christian tenets. Red Campion is symbolic of concealed wisdom, incest, family genetics, evolution, entrapment and assimilation, and the continuation of life after death, all of which are key to an examination of Lewis’s *The Meat Tree*.

Nona is anagrammatic for Anon, signifying a nameless zero or nothing. Anon is also a woman writer ‘who wrote so many poems without signing them’ because ‘anonymity runs in [women’s] blood’ (Woolf 45, 46). Nona is significant

in Welsh, Greek and Roman myth canons. The Welsh Nona, a variant of Non, was born in the late fifth century and was the mother of Saint David (Stephens 430). She gave birth to David in a cave, during a raging tempest, ‘where she is said to have pressed her fingers into a nearby rock with such force that the marks are still visible’ (Herrad, *The Woman* 127). Nona is the first of the three Fates, or goddesses of Destiny (Longenbach 21), a trio known in Roman myth as the Parcae and as the Moirae / Moerae in Greek myth (Grimal 328) who regulate every individual’s life by means of a thread (Grimal 278). One spins the metaphorical thread of life, the second weaves and the third cuts. In Roman records, she is the Parcae who spins and she retains her name Nona, but in Greek myth she is named Clotho (Longenbach 21). Her thread is often blood red (Walker 172) and she is a goddess of labour and birth as she is responsible for the first cast of thread, determining an individual’s birth (Hornblower 589). Graves notes that the Moirae are credited ‘with the first invention of the alphabet’ (210).

In Nona, then, there is a layering of intetextuality where she is a bringer of new life who decides the manner in which that new life begins, she is a goddess of Destiny whose influence reaches through time and space, and she is a pioneer of linguistics and new forms of communication. She is also a Welsh Saint who is, in Brittany, held in greater esteem than her son, David (Herrad, *The Woman* 127). Lewis’s thematic concerns with the evolving imagination and Welsh myth, with anonymous women’s creative imaginary, gestation and birth, birthing of children who possess metaphysical powers, and commingling of poetry and technology, all intersect in the etymology of Nona.



### Fantasy and Mythopoeia in *The Meat Tree*

For Alicia Ostriker, women writers' engagement with androcentric myth is another turn in the cycle of mythopoeic evolution (318). Timelessness and myth's evolutive nature are reflected in Lewis's feeling that 'evolution would have a part' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 250) in her retelling of the Welsh source tale. Lewis states that she is 'a fan of science fiction and [has] often noted how myths find a natural place in such writing. So [she] resolved to try and tell the Blodeuwedd story on a spaceship' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 250). For Lewis, then, mythopoeia transcends time and space and must react to humanity's evolving, yet universal, urge emotionally and intellectually to respond to myth. Humanity may evolve to accomplish interplanetary travel and its myths may alter to reflect, or incorporate, those new experiences. This approach to Welsh myth differs from that of other Welsh women writers treated in this thesis. Hilda Vaughan, for example, uncovers Welsh myth as a monolithic male construct to be exposed as an oppressive regime as per all mythos, whereas Alice Thomas Ellis presents an engagement which is similar to Lewis's (as an emotional and intellectual response), but does so by entwining Judeo-Christian mysticism and a rigid personal belief system. Ellis sees myth as evidence of heaven on earth, an eternal presence to which humans must attune themselves, whilst Lewis sees myth as something which attunes to humanity. For Vaughan and Ellis myth does not evolve, but for Lewis, it does.

In this respect, myth's protean abilities as an ever-changing entity which retains vestiges of its source, assimilating past versions of itself into its newest form, informs a reading of Lewis's *The Meat Tree*. The VR programme which Nona and Champion enter is more than a log-book parable; it has camouflaged not

only its sentience within a myth narrative, but also its need to feed on human imagination – an evolved need, bred over ‘three hundred million light years’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 222) of interaction with human life forms. Humanity’s continued willingness to engage with myth tales means they are still perfect prey. This VR world assimilates myth stories from the imaginations of its victims as a way of generating a renewable energy source and as a method through which to evolve its narrative arsenal – it is updating its own mythic canon in readiness for the next generation of assimilates.

Rosemary Jackson in her influential text, *Fantasy* (1981), theorises a realm of the paraxial within Fantastic literature that corresponds to Showalter’s gynocentric cultural and literary space, the wild zone. Jackson suggests that the

desire for otherness is not displaced into alternative regions of heaven or hell, but is directed towards the absent areas of this world, transforming into something ‘other’ than the familiar, comfortable one. Instead of an alternative order, it creates ‘alterity’, this world re-placed and dislocated. A useful term for understanding and expressing this process of transformation and de-formation is ‘paraxis’. (19)

Drawing upon Jackson’s analysis of the Fantastic mode of literature, Sarah LeFanu elides distinct principles of fantasy and science fiction, stating that ‘the subversive nature of fantasy, its interrogation of unitary ways of seeing, its tendency towards the dissolution of structures and its open-endedness [...] can be claimed also for science fiction’ (22). She claims that much of what Jackson purports to be a definition of the fantastic ‘can be applied to science fiction’ (23). Showalter’s ‘wild zone’, Jackson’s ‘paraxial realm’ and LeFanu’s ‘interrogation of unitary ways of seeing’ that coincide with a ‘dissolution of structures’ are

germane to Gwyneth Lewis's science fiction novella and the vision of time and space presented within it.

The spaceship encountered by Campion and Nona has travelled for an indeterminable time 'and in space, history means distance' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 193). Campion states, 'It's no good, I can't figure it. The timeline just doesn't make sense. This case seemed so straight-forward at first, but the more I look at this little ship, the stranger it is' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 108 – 109). It is a space wreck, an article of extra-terrestrial flotsam that has been drawn into Mars's arc of orbit. It has unknown origins and is an enigma to the scientific community, represented by Nona and Campion. It has literally emerged from the wild zone.

*The Meat Tree* has a chronotopic structure which assimilates the Welsh myth tale framed within the VR programme. Armitt discusses the chronotope of 'two historical presents' (*Contemporary* 36) by drawing on Morrison's *Beloved* and Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, and Bakhtin's theorisation of time/space. This is relevant to *The Meat Tree* because, if 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' (Bakhtin qtd. in Armitt, *Contemporary* 39) and if history means distance, or time taken to travel, then it is entirely viable that Welsh myth exists as a historical present *within* Lewis's spaceship. Myth 'takes on flesh' and becomes the 'falling gobbets of flesh [of] Lleu's flowers' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 213). This analysis chimes with Aaron's recent reading of *The Meat Tree*: she suggests that 'the fabric of the myth is the fabric of the spacecraft itself' (*Welsh Gothic* 204). Like a genetic family tree, it is possible for its DNA to evolve and bequeath. Time and myth are encoded as a narrative within both the software and hardware of the spaceship.

Entering into the Virtual Reality programme, it slowly becomes apparent to Nona and Campion that what they are experiencing is actually original awareness. They have not travelled back in time to participate in the myth, but rather the Welsh myth has travelled with them and exists in the present, in them, in their culture and society. Welsh myth, like all mythos, has survived through time and space as a continually evolving psychical parasite. Like the creatures in the cinematic masterpiece of science-fiction/horror, *Alien* (1979), it is programmed to adapt in order to utilise any potential energy sources. Campion wryly notes that he and Nona have ‘both been infected with this myth’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 232) and that ‘evolution’s a joker, can do strange things’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 240). The ship/myth is ‘drawing life for itself from [his and Nona’s] explorations’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 242). He explains to Nona, ‘the ship’s been using our sensorium to feed itself and there’s no way out. We’ve given it freely exactly what it wanted. Women of flowers... sex changes in a forest, we’ve had a fine old romp through the imagination’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 233).

Lucie Armitt asserts that ‘boundaries, borders and thresholds are always key concepts for any reading of the fantastic’ (*Contemporary* 1) – the spaceship as a creature from the margins breaches borders and ruptures through boundaries. Events occurring in the VR suite are mimetic of material reality. Whilst role-playing is part of the VR dramatisation of the Welsh myth, Campion notes that it’s ‘as if the characters weren’t wholly differentiated from each other. That happens in the dreamlike early human myths and in this one. Think of it – men turn into animals, siblings are lovers, wild animals are princes. All the categories bleed’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 116). Campion and Nona discuss the notion of ‘mind

melding' when, ironically, they do not need the Joint Thought Channel to communicate, and do so telepathically at will; during this psychical discussion Campion pinpoints the *sub rosa* objective of the sentient ship where it utilises imagination as a fuel source. It is 'like the Catholic wafer, transubstantiation!' where it 'transforms the matter of every subject it touches' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 178,178). Via a psychical and transubstantiation process, the ship feeds on the word born of flesh, formed by a synaptic flare or enunciated via throat, lips and tongue.

### Fusionism in *The Meat Tree*

In the introduction to *Fantasy Fiction and Welsh Myth: Tales of Belonging* (1996), Kath Filmer-Davies posits imagination as the defining characteristic of humanity in an era of increasing symbiosis of the human and the technological – intelligence being the primary site of cross-fertilization. She states:

In a technological age, intelligence is as much a property of machines as it is of humans. If intelligence can be appropriated by clever computers, then what is the distinguishing mark of humanity? [...] Surely, it is the ability to be mythopoeic and mythopathic – that is, to have the ability to make myths and to respond to them – and, by extension to the metaphysical, psychological, and imaginative truths they contain. (xi)

Antithetically, Gwyneth Lewis perceives the imagination, through the poetic impulse, as being a form of technology in its own right; there is no distinction. In the previous chapter, Gillian Clarke's 'Olwen Takes Her First Steps on the Word Processor in Time of War' presents Olwen the poet questioning whether the

digital era can support, or translate, poetry. Once engaged with technology as a medium of expression, the poet locates her poetic Muse. With reference *The Meat Tree*, Lewis argues something similar, stating that:

I've heard poets argue that today poetry is a force that opposes technology. I believe that poetry itself is one of the earliest technologies and that the imagination is a form of virtual reality. I wanted to explore the way in which a certain kind of Celtic mythology is used in computer games and to deploy the convention to make a broader point about the imagination. I particularly wanted to look at the shadow side of the creative mind, the way in which it can consume as well as generate. Every writer is a meat tree of sorts. (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 252)

Here then, the developing technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are an evolution of modality through which the imagination is experienced. VR programmes are an extension of the imagination: they are translators which make visible to a multitude the imagined words, emotions, images and memories usually contained in a single mind. Like poetry, they make it possible to express the inexpressible. In this way every writer is a 'meat tree' for they are all chromosomally connected to their forbears. They convey their own imagination to the multitude and convert words from flesh, they '*mind-meld*' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 17) whilst symbiotically feeding on the imagination of others.

The ship itself is a wider representation of myth, a metaphor for myth, when it transforms itself to match the socio-historic milieu from which its victims originate. Even before they board the vessel, Nona notes how it seems to be an 'eye, coming closer, looking at us with curiosity' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 22) whilst Campion recognises it as shaped 'like a daffodil. Pity. You've seen one of these [mid-Carolingian solar sailing vessels], you've seen them all' (G. Lewis, *Meat*

*Tree* 22). As a daffodil it is symbolic of Wales and of Wordsworth's daffodils which are as 'continuous as the stars that shine / And twinkle on the milky way // [as] They flash upon [the] inward eye' (Abrams 284). In Campion's comment Lewis takes a wry swipe at Wordsworth's poem: 'You've seen one of these [...] you've seen them all' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 22), a comment which questions veneration of the poem and its status as canonical poetry that enunciated Wordsworth's myth of nature. However, this myth of nature is apposite to *The Meat Tree*'s thematic concerns as it signals Wordsworth's development of his 'emotional and moral life as an interaction between his mind and the outer world' (Abrams 220). In Lewis's novella, technology becomes the interstitial site between the inner and outer worlds of poetry and mythology.

VR also functions to reflect reality but does so through distortion; it attempts to reflect the psychology of every individual who has entered its domain. The effect renders that which is, or should be, familiar to the individual as unfamiliar; this is because familiarity is also presented according to the perception of other individuals acting within the same VR programme. Campion is anxious about Nona adapting to 'strange VR' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 36) and once they have connected their helmets to the system he reassures her, saying: '*We're used to VR forming itself automatically to our frontal-lobe profiles, so that it responds to our particular fantasy life*' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 37). In this respect, Freud's notion of *unheimlich* and Rosemary Jackson's exploration of the optical paraxial non-place within fantasy fiction, both lend themselves to a reading of the role of the VR within Lewis's *The Meat Tree*. VR is a cybernetic site of multiple participants in a fictionalised version of the world, and presents a 'story' capable

of sustaining (and encouraging) individual and group engagement. These functions directly reflect the role and purpose of myth in society and also, seemingly, inform Lewis's exploration of the symbiosis of the human and cyber-imagination within *The Meat Tree*.

Lewis states her interest in the role of 'Celtic mythology [...] in computer games' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 242) in a context in which online and 3D gaming is a late twentieth-century phenomenon and a popular arena for contemporary social engagement with mythologies (Vallikatt 11). Lewis's version of VR demands a radical engagement with its story-telling – that is, a complete suspension of disbelief through a psychological immersion within the game's software. In VR the imagination is the hardware's computing platform on which myth, as a type of software, is run. Nona expects it to be '*no different from the neuro games*' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 36) she usually plays. Imagination forms the basis of humanity's interaction with mythology in a technological epoch, but there is more needed in order for the VR/game to be successful in its rendering of mythos – its software must make room for what Kath Filmer-Davies terms humanity's 'mythopathy' or its ability to respond not only to myths on a superficial narrative level but to the 'metaphysical, psychological, and imaginative truths they contain' (xi). Therefore, in a technological age, such as that figured in Lewis's *The Meat Tree*, humanity's engagement with myths consists of more than just plugging one's self into a computer programme; the self also generates responses, albeit through interaction with this new medium of cyber-mythography.



Bettelheim, in his psychoanalytic account of the function of myth, argues that: ‘The myth presents its theme in a majestic way; it carries spiritual force; and the divine is experienced in the form of superhuman heroes who make constant demands on mere mortals’ (26). Within the VR of Gwyneth Lewis’s *The Meat Tree* mere mortals may, in fact, attain the status of a superhuman hero and may occupy their chosen characters’ place in the mythic narrative. Again there is a blurring of boundaries, this time between modes of storytelling and their function – myth becomes accessible just as fairy tales are. The consequence of this blurring of boundaries within *The Meat Tree*, however, is not entirely positive.

Both Campion and Nona struggle to resolve personal conflicts that they have carried with them into the VR, and because of their vulnerability as humans within a mythic structure they suffer emotional harm. For example, as part of the progression of the VR story Nona undertakes the role of Goewin, virgin footholder to King Math who is raped by Gilfaethwy. Nona experiences the rape first hand. Her reaction is to question the ‘reality’ of the VR programme as experiencing the psychological, emotional and physical effects of a rape should not be possible in a computer programme. Complaining to Campion she says, ‘*Fuck the story. I really don’t care. Look at these bruises. These are real. VR shouldn’t be able to do that. [...] I didn’t sign up for this, to be raped by a hairy medieval gangster. [...] Don’t tell me it’s fiction, that was something else*’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 49). Later she considers ‘if anything like that happens again and he tells me it was just VR, I’ll kill him’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 53). Nona, as a woman, has carried her subordinated role in a patriarchal society with her into the VR field, a role mirrored in myth where ‘gender asymmetries [have been] agreed

upon for centuries by [androcentric] myth's disseminators' (Purkiss 441). Myths often cast women as victims, as 'symbol rather than subject [and] excluded from civilisation' (Purkiss 444) and because the VR plot is programmed as a myth cycle, it responds to Nona's internalised passivity, thus casting her, and encouraging her to cast herself, as Goewin rather than Gilfaethwy.

It is no coincidence that one of the central themes of the *The Meat Tree* is that of fusionism. Metamorphosis underpins the original Welsh myth tale of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, upon which Lewis bases her narrative, and which is framed within the VR programme. Within the source tale, there are numerous transformations and for many reasons. It is called upon as punishment (Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, Blodeuwedd and her maidens), salvation (Lleu), creation (Blodeuwedd, Dylan) and deception (Gwydion and Lleu deceive Arianrhod). The Welsh source material abounds in instances of humans being turned into animals (Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, Lleu and Blodeuwedd), of animals into humans (Hychddwn Hir, Hyddwn and Bleiddwn), of humans transformed into water (Dylan), of flowers being turned into humans (Blodeuwedd), and of humans altering their facial features to disguise themselves (Gwydion and Lleu). Every instant of transmutation that occurs in the original myth tale is presented in the VR version and is, in particular instances, extended.

Gwyneth Lewis interrogates the dissolution of barriers using an intertextual device of placing a 'story within a story', of framing a narrative, to expand upon her interests as a writer, thereby drawing attention to the intertextual, and possibly metafictional, qualities of *The Meat Tree*. To expand this assertion I would like to suggest that there is a third protagonist present in *The Meat Tree*, a

silent narrator who does not reveal her presence nor her narratorial manipulation, incursion even, until the novel's denouement. Throughout the narrative this silent character, the sentient spaceship itself, has presented and manipulated the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* to satisfy its own interests. It is the conscious imagination of the ship, existing in the software of the VR. Drawing again upon Ostriker's analysis of revisionist mythmaking, it could be said that the spaceship has undertaken its own act of revision in order to develop its own 'instructions for survival' (318). Outside VR, Nona admits her concerns to Campion stating: 'And I tell him that I think that the game has moved from the VR suite and into my head' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 168). This finds an echo in Arthur C. Clarke's short story *The Sentinel* (1951) which then inspired Stanley Kubrick's cinematic epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) because it features a cognizant computer system that takes over a spaceship. In such narratives, as well as *The Meat Tree*, the spaceship has replaced god as a model for the omniscient narrator, signalling an evolution in narrativising formed via poly- or multivalency.

Heretofore the spaceship has silently controlled the framed VR narrative and in doing so has incrementally gained influence upon Nona and Campion's conscious and unconscious minds. Using myth, it has camouflaged its assimilation of their minds and bodies. When the humans prepare to confront the ship Nona asserts, 'Well I'll be damned if I'm waiting here till I go mad. If this vessel really is a cannibal ship, at least I want to use my mind until the last moment. We know it uses us when we're asleep, I'd rather be active and see what comes' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 235). Later on, Campion realises that the ship 'disguised itself, using what was in our heads to look familiar. [...] It used our own ideas' (G. Lewis,

222). This also goes some way to emphasise the ship as a representative of mythic function, and to explain the ship's use of myth in its VR predatory machinations. Myth becomes the perfect lure for the human mind as it provides enough tenuity to be recast according to the individual human mind, including the ship's mind, and yet is durable enough not to be rendered incomprehensible so that the illusion is broken.

### Parasitic Assimilation and *The Meat Tree*

Nona and Champion find themselves at the core of a story that is parasitically assimilating their imagination and their conscious minds. There are many instances of this developing transmutation to support this analysis. However, this is most obvious at the moment when Champion has entered the VR suite without Nona and plays the part of Gwydion when he and Math are creating Blodeuwedd out of flowers. Despite Nona being asleep in her hammock situated in a different part of the ship she is still, imaginatively, part of the action taking place in the VR. Against her conscious will, she is experiencing being birthed as Blodeuwedd. This scene conveys not only the blurring of boundaries between VR and reality, but also the commingling of Nona and Blodeuwedd, a process that has been slowly cumulating towards this moment of birthing:

[Inspector of Wrecks in the VR programme]

And the body we conjure out of buds, flowers and seeds isn't an orphan. She's our daughter – mine and Math's. It's our minds have given birth to her in the shape of our delights, our fondness, our grief. Maybe our failings. [...]

*Apprentice*

I lie here with my eyes half open and something works its way with me.

I dream of cells illuminated by a soft green light. Chloroplast.  
Ribosomes. [...] I'm in a forest of amino acids – protein chains which  
sway, like saplings, then blossom with molecular flowers. [...] How will  
things look from this new point of view?  
(G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 162 – 163)

The multivalency of the psyches accelerates to the point where Nona's consciousness, even whilst she is awake, is entirely subsumed by her mythic avatar. As Nona / Blodeuwedd she 'mind melds' with Campion without him knowing, furthering Lewis's exploration of an illimitable transmutation through parasitic evolution.

This is not death by technology; parasitism is, rather, a mutually beneficial advancement of life through assimilation of poetic imagination, science, myth and language. For example, Campion and Nona / Blodeuwedd begin a conversation in which Campion perceives that he is talking to himself as he hypothesises the fate of the missing space crew.

*He*

Funny, I could have sworn that tone of voice was...no, that's ridiculous.

*Apprentice*

I'll try an experiment. If I make the rootlets of my mind reach out into  
Campion's how far can we go?  
[...]

*He*

Nona? Is that you? How did you do that? (Lewis *Meat Tree* 176 – 179)

In response to Campion's question Nona declares, 'Now that we're married we can hear each other all the time. [...] Now that I'm Blodeuwedd and you are Lleu' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 179). Nona and Campion have, at this point, recognised that

the characters in VR have apparently become assimilated with their original awareness. Armitt, analysing Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, states:

most unstable of all is the one chronotope [...] upon which, in mimesis, we commonly believe we can rely: namely that of the 'I' itself, which shifts in status continually between the subject of enunciation and the subject of enunciating. [...] Russ delights in playing havoc with this post-structuralist metaphor, the subject who is enunciating frequently being disguised behind a cloak of anonymity, but one that shifts continually between fictive selves. (Armitt, *Contemporary* 47)

Such conflation between enunciating selves, speaking from a juxtaposed twelfth-century Welsh myth and twenty-third-century Mars orbit, is present within *The Meat Tree*, arousing suspicion as to the reliability of narrator perspective.

It is the syntonic acceptance of conjoining, of minds and bodies, that allows Nona and Campion to continue their journey through the myth tale that will eventually reveal the history of the spaceship. In other words, Campion and Nona's progress through the narrative of the myth depends upon their psychological fusion with the characters in the VR suite. They both must neutralise the threat of assimilation by accepting it. Previously such fusion when pushed too far, too soon by the VR/narrative caused both to 'freak' out (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 130) as the concept of transubstantiation had not yet matured within their awareness. The psychological preparation for their assimilation is figured through maternal and paternal instincts.

Early on in the VR's mythic narrative both Nona and Campion are cast as animals when they are Gilfaethwy and Gwydion undergoing punishment for rape. Campion, by accident at first and then through choice, takes the female role and bears three young. He thrills at the experiences gifted to him by the VR narrative,

marvelling at ‘the baby’s sweet aroma when he came out!’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 67). Champion is confused by his instinctive maternal actions, saying ‘How did I know to lick the fawn’s faeces and urine in order to hide its scent? It’s as if instinct was wired into the game in a way I can’t explain’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 67). The VR prepares Nona and Champion for assimilation by suggesting maternal and paternal bonds with offspring, bonds based on the imagination and not on physical reproduction.

As indicated above, the ship is a silent omniscient narrator who recasts myth according to its own interstellar survival needs. This is the true reasoning behind the ship’s mind melding with Nona and Champion and it brings with it a further complication of perception and narration, particularly those of Nona / Blodeuwedd. Champion and Nona have begun to rightly assume that the ship is, in fact, an evolved organism that has itself fused with its crew, a crew that has consisted, in the past, of humans, plants and animals. The VR narrative has not been a metaphorical account of this metamorphosis, but is literal: ‘The ship didn’t come from Earth but from much further away. That it came from a place so distant that humans and plants had time to marry, like Blodeuwedd and Lleu, to evolve together’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 182). As a representation of evolution posed as an assimilation of poetic imagination, myth, science, Blodeuwedd then, is in fact, the ship.

Here then, survival of the fittest is not so much focussed on the strongest of a species, or the strongest species, but rather those who are the most able to adapt to assimilating forces; those who are most willing to efface themselves for the sake of longevity. As Virginia Woolf suggests, this is a strategy often

employed by women writers (46). Narrative viewpoint, where it has come to switch between Nona and her VR character, now elides between Nona, Blodeuwedd of the VR and Blodeuwedd as the ship. In Nona's Synapse Log, just after she has voiced her suspicions of the parasitic nature of the ship, Nona's viewpoint shifts and confirms these suspicions as the ship, through Nona, reveals itself as a speaking subject.

*Apprentice*

I inherited habitual movements in order to seek just the right amount of illumination.

A plant is an animal that can't yet move. Except if it's in a spaceship. Using a vessel as her legs and a man as her servant. [...]

And don't tell me that a plant can't traverse vast distances, manipulating the desires of others to her own end. In that particular survival strategy, beauty is the killer. (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 183 – 184)

A sentient being, the gendered 'she-ship' has evolved through her absorption of its crews and their mythic belief systems, thus ensuring the immortality of those organisms as well as herself; being 'a self-regulating system' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 231) she is both host and parasite, another instance of dissolved boundaries. In its most literal form, she is a carnivorous plant. Again, as in *Alien* (1979), the ship is an unregulated female predator, capable of assimilation through cannibalism. Incest and cannibalism are at the heart of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* and, bringing to mind Cronus and Rhea or Zeus and Hera, such taboos are also at the core of Classical myth. Incest and cannibalism are part of humanity's story: myth stories were created to explain origins of the species.

In her Reith Lectures published as *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (1994), Marina Warner discusses an elision between cannibalism and incest



where ‘control of the processes of consumption confers great power’ (68). Tracing such symmetry to Classical myth and the origins of the Classical Gods and Titans, Warner notes how ‘cannibalism often occurs in myth alongside incest’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 69) and refers to usurpation of the female as bringer of new life, citing Cronus’s swallowing and re-birthing of his children first born from Rhea, his sister. In this myth canon ‘Hera, Demeter, Hades, Hestia, Poseidon – reenter the world, twice born of their father, begotten and brought forth. The devouring here acts as a prelude to birth; incorporation turns into a surrogate pregnancy’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 69). In the Welsh source tale of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, on which Lewis draws, Gilfaethwy and Gwydion are transformed into beasts over three cycles, as alternating male and female mates. The brothers have sex with each other in beast form and produce offspring, first as deer, then as pigs and then as wolves. Afterwards, Gwydion is father/uncle to Lleu Llaw Gyffes (in English, Fair One with a Steady Hand) who is born of Aranrhod, Gwydion’s sister.

Robert Graves notes the etymology of Lleu, which means ‘light’ and ‘son’ (301). In Lewis’s retelling of the tale, when Nona and Campion are in the VR suite as Gilfaethwy and Gwydion, their final form as wolves has them hunting deer. Nona narrates the hunt as she locates a fawn, describing in first person: ‘I plunge in my jowls and wear the blood like light on my face’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 88). Here, mimicking the carnivorous ship, Nona and Campion could potentially be cannibalising their own child, begotten in their previous form as deer (as brothers they committed incest), and could be eating Lleu, a son/nephew whose blood lights up their faces.

Warner argues: ‘cannibalism has taken place and has been – and is – very widely and deeply experienced – in the imagination’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 78), just like myth tales. Cannibalism and incest lie at the core of many myth tales and so the ship has incorporated those elements into its survival mechanisms so that it both incites incest and cannibalism, whilst being a product of such transgressions. As each new generation of prey becomes assimilated into the feeding process via the ship’s VR myth game ‘the story determines what the ship can do physically’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 240). In cannibal lore, ‘a slippage occurs between actual and symbolic consumption of human flesh’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 69), but in *The Meat Tree*, such slippage is very real, predatory, and actively seeking new myths and new meat.

Just like early explorers of Africa and the Indies (M. Warner, *Managing* 78), Campion and Nona struggle to comprehend the metaphoric significance of cannibalism as assimilation into an alien culture – their struggle to comprehend the idea of cannibalism obscures their actual transubstantiation; the metaphor is real. Warner argues:

that imagery of forbidden ingestion masked other powerful longings and fears – mingling and hybridity, about losing definition, about swallowing and being swallowed – fears about a future loss of identity, about the changes that history itself brings. (M. Warner, *Managing* 78)

Cannibalism stems from ‘centuries of myth-making, an expression of deep desires and passions and terrors’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 78), but Lewis’s space researchers realise that the threat is not a latent psychological, primordial throwback; the danger to their physical being is real and they are almost too far

assimilated to reverse the process. Just as they have deciphered clues in the VR that have prepared them for the absorption, they have missed clues in the physicality of the ship which would have alerted them to it being Blodeuwedd, a female predator.

On approaching the ship Campion notes how it has ‘a habitat module like the stigma of the flower. In fact, the whole thing looks like a daffodil’ and when onboard the ship the humans smell ‘*Flowers. And meat*’ (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 22, 32). Later, because of her access to the thought processes of Blodeuwedd/the ship, Nona now is able to piece these clues together. At this point Nona recognises and can interpret the deeper layers of meaning presented in the metafictional VR story, and so can successfully decode the mythic narrative. She correctly translates events in the myth to ascertain that when Blodeuwedd is turned into an owl she is essentially being turned into a carnivorous predator. She says:

I try to laugh because compared to being a plant this is up the evolutionary ladder! [...] The reason they made me an owl... [...] is because I’m a master bird of prey. Don’t you see? [...] The ship is entering another phase, with another species. The story determines what the ship can do physically. It’s turning overtly predatory! (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 239 – 240)

The ship is a monstrous female, depicted in the same vein as female monsters in Classical myth, Welsh myth, canons of Classical poetry, and popular culture. Blodeuwedd as a ship is predatory, ‘uncontrollably fertile [and] resistant to restraints’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 2). Presenting herself as a daffodil she is specifically a Welsh monstrous female.

According to Gina Wisker, contemporary feminist fiction which draws upon the monstrous female reclaims ‘the “monster woman”’: it turns the tables and

revels in her power' (55). Such reclamation of the monstrous female 'enables a direct confrontation with gendered configurations of power' (Wisker 55). In *The Meat Tree*, Blodeuwedd the ship and Blodeuwedd the mythic flower-woman are a 'Venus flytrap' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 219) and so is a type of meat-eating *vagina dentate* (Wisker 59). Female predators of this kind 'ensnare unsuspecting [victims as their] frills and furbelows of femininity hide the knife' (Smith *Misogynies* 45). Tudor Balinisteanu argues that 'in science fiction imagery one often comes across conflation of the otherness of woman and nature set up in technological environments [in a way which also demonstrate] the otherness of technology' (403, 404). But Lewis complicates a straightforward reading of the female ship as a *femme fatale*.

Blodeuwedd assimilates Nona, a female rape victim of a misogynist interstellar patriarchy (after thirty million years human gender relations have not evolved much) whilst Champion is jettisoned. For Wisker, feminist reclamations of the *femme fatale* often situate such characters in an 'existence which denies the bounds of space and time' (54) and this is true of Lewis's Blodeuwedd who is a type of a female vampire: she invites Nona to join her in an interstellar, immortal, and evolutive existence. Drawing on Armitt's interrogation of space/time as presented in women's writing, Lewis presents a postmodern novella which 'open[s] up a new understanding of our relationship to literary and cultural spaces, and in the process, makes us radically rethink the nature of the role they play in our awareness of the structures of social and sexual relations' ('Space, Time' 60). Lewis engages in a feminist revision of Welsh myth, specifically of the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*, where the misogynies which lie at its heart, and which

are symbolised through latent themes and motifs (such as incest, cannibalism, and predatory females), are revealed and held up for scrutiny.

### Conclusion.

I argue that Lewis's uncovering of latent themes within Welsh myth goes beyond the feminist strategy of rewriting 'particular favoured or disliked figures' (Purkiss 445). By writing *The Meat Tree* in a post-Devolution, early twenty-first-century Wales, Lewis creates a Welsh science fiction/mythopoeic narrative that finds parallel with other feminist genre fictions such as feminist dystopias. Jim Miller argues that such fictions are 'an imaginative site of experimentation where new notions of identity and community are under construction' (338). Within a science fiction mode, Lewis questions the veracity of Welsh myths as monolithic narratives 'to expose and disempower not merely these often repressive restrictive formulae but, more important, their informing ideologies' (Wisker 55). In this way she presents a complex engagement with Welsh myth as a buried truth of Welsh culture (Purkiss 445).

Lewis presents Welsh myth as the site upon which the imagination, the conscious and preconscious awareness, technology and poetry metamorphose into the next phase of humanity's interaction with its myths; for Lewis poetry and technology have never separated: the one has always been no more than a variation of the other. Speaking to Richard Poole, Lewis states,

I don't know that I see poetry and science as diametrically opposed. In fact, they're both provisional ways of describing a creation which is more

than both, so they're partners in their failure fully to describe the world.  
The discarded metaphors of science are of great use to a poet. (25)

Science and the imagination form an 'intelligence [that] is a web of filaments and filigrees' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 163) and are distant cousins on the same family tree, 'a tree, after all, whose branches are still bearing fruit and on which new leaves can never feel lonely' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 254). This unending cycle of immortality through evolution is present throughout *The Meat Tree* but is translated through Lewis's desire to 'see the losses, as well as the gains' (G. Lewis, 'Afterword' 254) of creative endeavours. The consuming potential of creativity and the imagination is perfectly envisaged in the metaphoric meat tree, a small and somewhat insignificant element in the original tale.

This re-focussing is gendered as a feminist recuperation. Balinisteanu states that 'in the contemporary myths at the confluence of science and fiction, women remain defined as an impotent presence in the masculine domain of technological environments' (420). But, as has been demonstrated throughout this discussion, Nona, Blodeuwedd and the spacecraft's assimilation is anything but impotent. The meat tree's fruit 'is always meat and more meat – the babies born from incest. A woman – fresh meat – made of the flesh of flowers. Now that tree is hungry' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 241). In the act of consuming it will transform its assimilants 'beyond all explanation' (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 244) – just as myth itself should.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: Welsh Myth in the Work of Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi and Tishani Doshi

### Introduction

Both published in 2013, *Fountainville* by Tishani Doshi and *The Tip of My Tongue* by Trezza Azzopardi appeared as the ninth and tenth novellas out of Seren's series of ten New Stories from *The Mabinogion*. They joined two other women writers on the list, those being Gwyneth Lewis and Fflur Dafydd, whose novella, *The White Trail*, was published in 2011. Within *Fountainville*, and *The Tip of My Tongue*, motherhood and maternal affinities between women feature largely. To a lesser extent they feature in Fflur Dafydd's post-modernist *The White Trail*. This chapter discusses how Welsh mythic romances become the site upon which motherhood and the role of the maternal are interrogated, focussing on Doshi and Azzopardi. Although all three redactions of *The Mabinogion* by Azzopardi, Doshi and Dafydd weave motherhood and the maternal into their retellings of source tales, in Doshi's and Azzopardi's novellas they are made central to their narratives. In *The White Trail*, Dafydd's narrative begins with the difficulties of pregnancy before exploring notions of identity and self in a postmodern world. In Doshi and Azzopardi's texts motherhood and the mother/daughter relationships underscore the importance of female traditions – of oral story-telling, of entrepreneurship, of surviving in an androcentric society that marginalises such traditions.

Both novellas explore the type of mother/daughter relationships which have the potential to pass on positive survival strategies. Where women exist in

the margins of patriarchy these strategies are shared and exist through oral traditions, they are spoken through generations of mothers, daughters and granddaughters. Both Azzopardi and Doshi foreground women working co-operatively, inter-reliance and the importance of the family unit which includes a strong matriarch. Doshi and Azzopardi's focus on motherhood, and Dafydd's exploration of identity can be traced to thematic concerns in their Welsh source tales.

The source tales of 'Geraint, Son of Erbin' (re-visioned by Azzopardi), 'The Lady of the Well' (re-visioned by Doshi) and 'How Culhwch Won Olwen' (retold by Dafydd) do not dwell on motherhood, particularly when compared with the Four Branches of *The Mabinogi* where maternal relationships are thematic through all three tales. However, Sioned Davies argues: 'The Arthurian world presented in 'How Culhwch Won Olwen' is very different to that found in [...] 'Geraint son of Erbin', and 'The Lady of the Well'' (xxiii). This can therefore account for differences in retellings. In 'How Culhwch Won Olwen', 'the atmosphere is one of aggression and heroic machismo' (S. Davies xxiv). In 'The Lady and the Well' and 'Geraint, Son of Erbin', Owain and Geraint are knights who undertake journeys in search of adventures which exist solely to 'put the hero to the test' (S. Davies xxiv), but one of the tests is to achieve and maintain a true and respectful love of a maiden. Davies suggests that these two tales demonstrate 'certain themes prevalent in the romance tradition, such as the education of the knight, and moderation between love and military prowess' (S. Davies xxiv).



Fflur Dafydd's *The White Trail* is set in a semi-rural early twentieth-century town and follows Cilydd, the husband of pregnant Goleuddydd who vanishes from a routine visit to their local supermarket. Cilydd loses his wife and unborn son (Culhwch) in one inexplicable moment. Despite exhaustive attempts by police investigators and Cilydd to find the pregnant woman, there is no trace. After many years, Cilydd gives up hope. He marries Gwelw whose husband has also disappeared (and been declared dead in the absence of a body). As a teenager, Culhwch arrives at Cilydd's house one evening after having escaped from organised crime boss Ysbaddaden Bencawr's control. Ysbaddaden Bencawr's criminal business provides a 'fake-death' service where he helps people to abandon their unhappy lives, but they then live in servitude to him. Goleuddydd and Gwelw's husband were clients. Culhwch explains he has fallen in love with the mobster's pregnant daughter Olwen and is now seeking help to rescue her from her tyrant father. Cilydd agrees and with the help of Arthur, his private investigator cousin, the three men rescue Olwen and ruin Ysbaddaden Bencawr.

Set in 1970s Wales, Trezza Azzopardi's novella *The Tip of my Tongue*, recounts nine-year-old Enid Bracchi's adjustment to living with her Aunt, Uncle and cousin (the Erbins) after her mother dies and her father is unable to care for her. The novella spans a year in which Enid negotiates the terms of her new life. With her mother's guidance she manages such negotiations fairly successfully by the narrative's conclusion.

*Fountainville* by Tishani Doshi is situated in the early decades of the twenty-first century, in Nagaland of North India. This tale features Luna, a young entrepreneur, who manages a surrogate-baby clinic for her adopted mother

Begum. Luna agrees to become a surrogate mother for Owain Knight, a monied outsider who has come to Fountainville to become a father. The surrogacy clinic is a successful business venture and draws the attention of local militia – they overrun Fountainville and the clinic. By chance, Owain's partner, Leo, arrives with a camera and a wi-fi connection allowing him to film and transmit to the world's media, footage of the militia's barbarism. An army intervention is ordered by the Indian government and Fountainville is saved. Luna, Owain and Leo settle in the now peaceful Fountainville to bring up their child.

Dafydd, Azzopardi and Doshi take, as their source, later tales from *The Mabinogion* which follow the adventures of Arthur, and which concentrate on representations of machismo and honour codes. In her *White Trail*, Dafydd takes part in a wider feminist tradition when she gives voice to the silenced Gloeuddydd and Gwelw in the source tale. But Doshi and Azzopardi go further, because in exploring the role and function of maternal relations and making them central to their texts, they are doing more than just recovering voices. They are recasting the role of the female in the source tale, in Welsh culture, and in wider romance structures. Rather than focussing on the knight's quest, their narratives provide a maiden's quest; the knight features in the woman's story.

Despite Welsh Devolution, or because of it, the twenty-first-century Welsh context is still one of fluctuation. This continued tension, although more positively cast in an era of devolved Welsh governance, provides Anglophone Welsh women writers with an opportunity, through the Seren series, to celebrate plurality. Complex representations of gender and nationhood through re-worked Welsh myth tales are constructed by Doshi and Azzopardi, allowing a new

engagement with nation-as-woman paradigms. In this way Doshi and Azzopardi go beyond a straightforward re-telling of source tales as they recuperate such paradigms which have been used to silence colonised women. Furber states that this ‘widely observed tendency to imagine the nation in feminine terms tends to lead to an objectification of women which denies them a role as active subjects’ (138), but in the new future-facing epoch of Welsh semi-autonomy Doshi and Azzopardi present active, speaking subjects. Motherhood and mothering are central to their remythification of Welsh women who refuse to be silenced, with the matrilineal survival strategies being significant in those complex constructions of gender and nationhood.

### Myth and Children

Within the dream of [childhood] innocence lies the imaginary state of wildness: the natural realm where animals live, which savages were also thought to inhabit. Like the child, this place can hold up the image of paradise lost, or of an unruly and dangerous territory which must be ordered, tamed, even consumed. (M. Warner, *Managing* xv)

Childhood is a primary thematic concern for all four Welsh women writers who have published New Stories from *The Mabinogion*. Their presentations of childhood are sites of ideological contestation which are, as Marina Warner argues in the epigraph above, subject to adult projections of self and society that strike to the core of humanity. Like Warner, Lucie Armitt argues that ‘childhood innocence is a collective myth to which we cling’ (*Twentieth-Century* 25). Mythopoeia is entwined in this complexity where childhood and myth commingle to reflect, and respond, to humanity’s need to feel located within time and space:

in essence, its need to belong. The following analysis explores how Lewis, Dafydd, Doshi and Azzopardi engage with, and construct, childhood as mythologised, ideological sites upon which mythic paradigms are interrogated.

As I argued in the previous chapter, motherhood and reproduction feature significantly in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* and in its evolution as a myth tale. Within Lewis's *The Meat Tree* the lost children of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy (Hychddwn Hir, Hyddwn and Bleiddwn), born as a foal, piglet and wolf-cub, are posed as predatory and feral. Having been born of two fathers, they are motherless boys. Their mother-figure is the parasitic Blodeuwedd/spaceship who fuses technology with mythic narrative in order to explore concepts of collective and individual identity.

Fflur Dafydd's *The White Trail* also includes two motherless and lost children (Culhwch and Olwen), a missing mother (Goleuddydd) and a distant mother (Gwelw). Olwen is pregnant and her father, the mobster Ysbaddaden Bencawr, intends to remove the child from Olwen because children are vital to the continued success of his business. He provides assistance to people who wish to fake their own death (using the Birds of Rhiannon) and also a safe place for them to hide for their remaining life. This safe place is a fortified mansion house which, like Lewis's mother-ship, signifies a paraxial space. It depends upon a childhood presence to maintain this liminality.

According to Warner, twentieth-century writing 'insists on children's intimate connection, above all, to a wonderful, freefloating world of the imagination. Their observable, active fantasy life, their fluid make-believe play brings them close to myth and fairy tale' (M. Warner, *Managing* 27). When

Dafydd's Culhwch rescues Olwen from the mansion, Olwen says to him, 'If [...] I leave, then this house – this house will fall, don't you understand? It's my presence here that's been keeping the place on its feet. I've given it life, new hope. [...] Only a child's presence could give the place hope' (Dafydd 179). As soon as she leaves it begins to disintegrate, destroyed by fire. In the novella's opening pages, Goleuddydd who is in advanced pregnancy (bearing Culhwch), experiences delusions:

One night, Cilydd woke to find her shining a torch on the wallpaper, and when he asked her what she was doing she told him she was looking for the join of flesh and concrete – for she dreamt that the baby had been built into the foundations of their home, squished between two bricks. (Dafydd 16)

Here, then, children are figured as metaphorical, spiritual, and physical guardians of the home where their real or psychic presence dictates the continued existence of that home. Recalling Warner's argument above, children and associated 'dream[s] of innocence' commingle with the 'myth of home' so that humanity (individually and collectively) may be located through time and space.

Moreover, entwined in this commingling are concepts of maternal influence. Processes of mothering either by heredity or social conditioning directly impact on a child. This means that motherhood, through its dominion over childhood, also controls humanity's destiny. In creating caricatures of children, Arthur (Culhwch's cousin) states: 'And I would just stare at the mother and stare at the child and I would see it all in there – maybe not in an obvious way, but hidden in little pockets of flesh [...]. A magic touch of flesh, holding all the features together' (Dafydd 89). Warner correlates this maternal influence with

mythic function, stating that ‘myths are not only delusions – chimaeras – but also tell stories which can give shape and substance to practical and social measures. How we treat children really tests who we are, fundamentally conveys who we hope to be’ (M. Warner, *Managing* 36).

Both Lewis and Dafydd signal not only the socialising influence of mothers, but also the genetic markers which physically bind a mother to child, markers which determine a biological family tree. This brings to mind Lewis’s meat tree motif which finds an echo in Olwen’s white flowers in *The White Trail*. Olwen’s white flowers, left as a trail for Culhwch to follow her to the mansion, ‘grew bolder, meatier, brighter as he passed by, the petals spilling over themselves [...] boasting new textures’ (Dafydd 109). Olwen’s white flowers ‘are tens of tiny pale heads, a gathering of lost souls’ (Dafydd 193). In Lewis and Dafydd’s revisions of *The Mabinogion*, lost children, lost souls, meat trees and new blossoms of meat flowers, plants with souls and genetic trails through evolutionary cycles, all intersect through constructions of childhood, mothering and Welsh myth.

Whilst Lewis’s *The Meat Tree* suggests a more complex interrogation of these intersections with regard to myth and myth’s function within the human imaginary, Dafydd’s *The White Trail* signals its importance by foregrounding mothering in women characters who are silent in the source tale. In the text’s ‘Afterword’, she asserts that she wanted to look for the ‘gaps, the silences’ (Dafydd 205), to find out ‘Why did Goleuddydd become mad in pregnancy? Was it a hormonal imbalance, or was it something more deep-rooted?’ (Dafydd 206). In this way Dafydd’s magic realist text gives voice to silenced Welsh mythic women and associates their fertility and life-giving capacities with their

autonomy. Moreover, childhood innocence in her work is a site upon which to interrogate voice, autonomy and identity; unlike Lewis however, she does not foreground explorations of the function and status of mythic narrative in that interrogation.

Doshi's *Fountainville* opens with the protagonist recounting how she is taken into fosterage after being orphaned as a young teenager. She is a motherless child who lives with a foster parent who, having no children of her own, becomes a surrogate mother. Doshi explores issues surrounding surrogacy, polygamy, in vitro fertilisation using donor sperm and ovum resulting in three-parent babies, and heterogeneous family collectives. She thus examines the importance of parental vocatives. Who is 'mother' is detached from its signified person so that by the novella's conclusion, a child is raised by a community of care-givers, including its biological mother and father. Again, Lewis's notion of genealogy, figured as a meat tree, is apposite whereby plural parentage and lineage impact upon a child's past, present and future.

The surrogate pregnancy clinic creates new life via medical technology and its business model incorporates mythic narrative, assimilating storytelling traditions and scientific discourse into its marketing spiel. As will be discussed later in this chapter Doshi's retelling of Welsh myth, like Lewis and Dafydd's, interweaves technology, reproduction, child-rearing and myth within her narrative. However, Doshi entwines myth through her explorations of genealogy, non-traditional family collectives, mothering and reproduction within a twentieth-century, postcolonial context.

Azzopardi, like her peers, also explores motherhood and motherless children in *The Tip of My Tongue*, presenting a motherless girl who is fostered after her mother's death and her step-father's inability to care for her. However, science and technology are not at the crux of Azzopardi's twenty-first-century engagement with myth – unless we consider Lewis's epistemology which perceives the poetic imaginary as a form of science. Azzopardi's child narrator continues to communicate with her mother through a poetry collection (published after her mother's death) which is dedicated to her. The following discussion considers novellas by Azzopardi and Doshi, specifically interrogating how motherhood and remythification intersect within their New Stories from *The Mabinogion*.

Trezza Azzopardi's *The Tip of My Tongue: and Some Other Weapons As Well* (2013)

Trezza Azzopardi's *The Tip of my Tongue: and Some Other Weapons As Well*, evocatively engages with a theme that cuts through not only the source tale of *The Mabinogion*'s 'Geraint Son of Erbin' but also through a wider body of writing which reworks older traditions. Silencing of the 'Other,' particularly of disenfranchised women, is central to the functions of many myth tales, and as a result, becomes a primary target for writers who wish to reclaim, uncover and recover silenced voices. *The Mabinogion*, however, does not provide such a clear-cut dichotomy between the powerful and powerless, the narrator and the narrated; just as the Island of Britain is a liminal space where magic and the mundane coexist in *The Mabinogion*, so too is language an unpredictable and composite



power. Azzopardi's Enid embodies the tensions between who is allowed to speak and who is not, and the fallibility of language as a code system.

The source tale, 'Geraint son of Erbin' (S. Davies 138 – 178) sees the fearless Geraint win the hand of Enid, daughter of impoverished Earl Ynywl. He takes Enid ap Ynywl as his wife and together they seek out competition and confrontation through which Geraint can maintain and increase his reputation as a warrior. Struck with jealousy Geraint demands Enid remain silent, an interdiction she refuses to obey when she alone perceives threats to Geraint's life. Time after time she warns him of impending danger despite being punished after each incident. Eventually, after Geraint lies half dead and a rescuing Knight physically abuses Enid, Geraint sees the folly of his harsh treatment of Enid. He avenges her mistreatment, apologises to her, and holds her words in high esteem henceforth.

It is Enid's refusal to be silent which informs Azzopardi's redaction of the source tale, a refusal which brings greater wisdom to the warrior Geraint, far more than his prowess in jousting tournaments and the battles he pursues. The source tale provides a balanced view of both characters, Enid's motives are revealed and she is presented as a fully functional and rounded figure, as much as Geraint is. Azzopardi further scrutinises Enid's consciousness by presenting her as a first-person narrator. Like the most interesting of fairy tale and myth retellings, however, Azzopardi's version goes further than just experimenting with authorial viewpoint.

Situated in 1976, when The Sex Pistols were beginning their reign as ultimate Punk Rockers, Azzopardi's nine-year-old Enid is sent to live with her distant relatives Celia and Horace Erbin, and their teenage son, Geraint. Enid's

poet mother has died from an unspecified illness and her father's recurring depression leaves him unable to care for Enid. The narrative follows Enid through this transitional time over approximately twelve months, recounting her birthday and ending in her first Christmas without her mother, but with her comfortably at the heart of her newly-formed family consisting of the Erbins and her father, Carlo. In this way, the text resists being defined as a *Bildungsroman* as Enid does not develop from a child's to adult awareness, despite the narrative focus on her acquiring a mature understanding of life through mastering language. The adults in Enid's life refuse to communicate clearly as they misdirect and codify language. Enid is intent on becoming a spy so that she too may learn the subliminal powers that language represents; she understands, like her namesake Enid daughter of Ynywl, that to survive in a world in which you are expected to be silent, language is 'the most potent weapon in your armoury' (Azzopardi 56).

Enid's childish understanding of the complexities of language in the adult world is passed to her from her mother. Enid's relationship with her mother, Maria, is established through Maria's instructions and guidance relating to Enid's use of language. From the start, Enid reveals her intention to become 'an International Spy [...] gathering information by being sneaky and using [...] special powers to [her] Utmost Advantage as A Champion of Law and Order and Justice' (Azzopardi 13). Law, order and justice, however, are ontological and epistemological regimes which support the phallogentric ruling centre; regimes which exclude, repress and silence women and as such they are interrogated and challenged by gynocritical writers. As a nascent spy, Enid asks too many questions of her mother, her inquisition is halted so that Maria can continue a

manual domestic task (feeding a wet curtain through a mangle). She holds up her hand and tells Enid that she has ‘a rare skill’ for asking questions at inopportune moments (Azzopardi 13).

Already Enid’s complex engagement with language is laid out; she is aware of her ignorance and in seeking knowledge to counter the gaps in her understanding, she overcompensates. Striving to comprehend adult language is her strength and her downfall; it is a power which requires skill and maturity if it is to be successfully wielded. Maria knows the rules and attempts to instil them into her daughter. Enid says, ‘I’d like to ask her my question but she has taught me that there are moments I can speak and moments I must keep Schtum’ (Azzopardi 13).

Maria, who understands the vagaries of language both as a woman and as an acclaimed poet, perceives Enid’s innocence as a tool which can be manipulated. Enid, who has not yet learned the tenets of power intricately bound to language, does not recognise how she may be manipulated, or rather, she recognises that she is being manipulated but cannot fathom why. She proudly declares that, ‘My mother is training me to be a spy so that I can tell her what is going on with my dad when she is not there. I am her Eyes and Ears’ (Azzopardi 14). Enid does not understand the motive behind her mother’s instruction: she does not recognise subtext and perceives explicit meaning only. Her task is to spy on her father and report back to her mother, not because Enid is in training to become a spy but because there is an underlying mistrust between Maria and Enid’s father, Carlo. This mistrust is manifest in Maria’s reaction to Carlo when she realises he is drunk, again, whilst Enid is in his care. She asks: ‘Carlo, have

you been drinking? Have you? Have you? You know what I said last time’ (Azzopardi 66). Carlo’s irresponsibility is an ongoing issue in the family and Enid is the medium through which Maria can monitor him.

As Maria’s illness progresses it becomes ever more important for Enid to begin to understand the subtext of lexis as Maria will not be able to guide Enid as she matures from child to adult. Maria endeavours to provide Enid with guidance which will help her to survive the world as a motherless child, and attempts to instil such guidance through figurative language. For Maria, Enid’s maturation will be signalled in her shift from understanding only the explicit features of language to grasping the implicit and unspoken nuances as well. Maria is aware that this is a journey which Enid will undertake and complete on her own.

Whilst revisioning Welsh myth, Azzopardi also engages with folk tales as didactic narratives. Such tales have socio-cultural roots, being passed on from adult to child as *rite de passage*. Historically, female-centric tales with their origins as orality tales were ‘not stories of fantasy, but of observation’ wherein hunger, infanticide, abandonment, step-sibling rivalry for patrimony and primogeniture (Orenstein 76) were very real problems to be grappled with. Maria is acutely aware that after her own death, Enid will be particularly vulnerable as a motherless child and that Enid will need to be cared for by another woman, a distant relative called Celia Erbin. Celia is mother to the teenage boy, Geraint, who Maria fears will abuse Enid. Warner lends credence to Maria’s concerns as she scrutinises the lived experiences entangled within fairytales.

Warner provides a socio-historic reading of fairy tales and their encoded reality of step-mothers promoting the interests of their own children over the

offspring of previous unions (*Beast* 238). At the heart of fairytales there is often tension and competition between women, ‘divisions that may first spring from the preferences for a child of one’s own flesh’ (*Beast* 238). Within the Erbin’s household, Enid will be ‘an extra mouth to feed [and could be] competition for the patrimony’ (Orenstein 77). During an argument with Carlo, which Enid witnesses, Maria says, ‘My daughter [...] Do you know how hard this is?’ (Azzopardi 32). Maria understands that life will be difficult enough for Enid without being a motherless child living in a stranger’s household.

In preparing Enid for her extended stay with the Erbins, and for her journey into adulthood, Maria narrates a story for Enid, the parable of Princess Nettle, which contains specific life lessons. Princess Nettle lives in a beautiful forest surrounded by many other beautiful princesses (Daisy, Marigold, Buttercup, and so on). They all get picked for their beauty and Nettle is always left behind, but she is performing an important task of protecting the fauna of the woodland. One day, Lady Muck visits the woodland and picks Nettle by mistake and as revenge for being stung, destroys Nettle. In protest (after a Union meeting) the fauna leave the woodland and it falls to decay. Lady Muck, seeing the consequences of her revenge, apologises to Nettle who is then encouraged to flourish once more. After a while, the animals, birds, and insects return to the woodland bringing with them vitality and vibrancy.

It is for Enid to pick out the lessons, a task with which, at nine years of age, she struggles. Maria intends the story to follow a *rite de passage* pattern, ‘the same pattern that characterizes human rituals marking life transitions: birth, death, and especially puberty or initiation rites’ (Orenstein 77). Enid is familiar with her

mother telling stories and is used to being cast as the protagonist of those tales; in the case of Princess Nettle, however, Enid cannot rely on such explicit denotations when applying the lessons contained within the story to her own experiences. She asks, ‘Why isn’t she called Enid like normal?’ (Azzopardi 68). Further on, she recognises a growing affinity with Princess Nettle, saying,

I’m starting to get a bit grumpy about Nettle never getting picked for anything. Fat Karen at school never gets picked for anything when we do games because she’s fat, but she’s really good at throwing and catching all the same so somebody really should pick her, especially for rounders. I want to point this out to my mother, but she’s well into her story. (Azzopardi 70)

By the end of the story she has begun to extrapolate the significance of specific features of the narrative and is beginning to assimilate them to her selfhood, recognising the significance of Princess Nettle requesting to be left in peace so that she ‘may be of benefit to the rest of Mankind’ (Azzopardi 74). This is apparent when, at the story’s conclusion, she recognises that despite the difference in name, she was Princess Nettle from the beginning.

Despite needing to confirm her understanding of the story, asking, ‘And the moral of the story is...?’ (Azzopardi 75), Enid has assimilated it as a survival strategy and her mother ratifies her insights. In answer to Enid’s question about the moral of Princess Nettle, Maria states,

The moral is, if that Geraint starts to pick on you, you just tell him: he’s got no right, and you will do him no harm if he simply leaves you alone.

And lets me be of benefit to Mankind.

Exactly.

But mam, what if he doesn’t listen?

Then you punch his lights out. (Azzopardi 75)

Secrets and storytelling bond mother and daughter and allow Enid's mother to instil survival strategies into her daughter, weapons that Enid has permission to draw upon long after her mother's death. In conjuring the folktale of Princess Nettle as a way in which to suggest to Enid how she may defend herself from possible attack from Geraint, and to permit her to use violence if her negotiations fail, Maria engages with female storytelling which functions to instruct girl-child listeners through their *rite de passage*. Marina Warner asserts that 'the experiences [traditional fairy] stories recount are remembered, lived experiences of women, not [...] concoctions from the depths of the psyche; they are rooted in the social, legal and economic history of marriage and the family, and they have all the stark actuality of the real' (*Beast* 238). Thus, Azzopardi's text brings together myth and fairy tale as she uncovers their potential as sources of gynocentric empowerment. Both female and male traditions are reworked to provide a stratagem for the motherless Enid, who must learn to dig out gynocentric narratives of autonomy entwined within myths and fairy tales, if she is to survive as an adult Welsh woman.

An example of how a woman who wishes to vocalise her selfhood, or whose very life depends on her ability to negotiate the perils of being a speaking woman in a patriarchal hegemony, is found in Enid ap Ynywl of the text's source tale. When Enid ap Ynywl speaks out she weighs her words and considers the implications of her utterance; the third-person narrator reveals her thought processes which underpin her vocalisation. The narrator presents Enid's awareness that speaking out, or not speaking out, is a choice fraught with risk. It is

often a matter of life and death, or of her being raped or not being raped. Her position and status within the patriarchal structures depend upon skilful loquacity and negotiations. In the source tale this awareness, along with an example of her negotiations, can be found in the section of the tale in which the Dun Earl plots to kill Geraint and abduct Enid. The earl gives Enid a choice of complying without the threat of violence or of being forcefully taken – with Geraint being murdered, regardless of her choice. The Dun Earl says to Enid,

‘But if you do this for me of your own free will, there will be an unbroken, everlasting agreement between us as long as we live.’

She thought about what he had said and as a result she decided to give him some encouragement in what he had asked.

‘This is what is best for you, lord,’ she said. ‘Lest I be accused of great infidelity, come here tomorrow and carry me off as if I knew nothing about it.’

‘I will do that,’ he said. [...] At the time she told Geraint nothing of the man’s conversation with her, lest he should become angry or concerned, or distressed.

In due time they went to sleep. [...] But at midnight she woke up and [...] fearful and frightened she went to the edge of Geraint’s bed, and quietly and calmly said to him, ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘wake up and get dressed; this is the conversation the earl had with me, lord, and these are his intentions regarding me,’ she said, and she repeated the whole conversation to Geraint. And although he was angry with her, he accepted the warning and armed himself. (S. Davies 165)

Enid knows she must not upset the earl and so her compliance is given so that she may put off the attack on Geraint for as long as possible. She uses this interim time to tell Geraint of the plot so that they may escape. A first reading of the source tale suggests that Enid’s refusal to be silent saves Geraint’s life on several occasions. However, it can also be argued that it saves her own life too. Enid negotiates strategies which ensure the survival of herself and her husband.



In Azzopardi's novella, Enid's mother attempts to inculcate survival strategies in her daughter by dedicating a poetry collection to Enid, in which each poem is about Enid and the mother/daughter nexus. She bequeaths her daughter a tradition of revisionist mythmaking which challenges and corrects gender stereotypes. Maria's collection is published posthumously and is given to Enid on her birthday, by her father. Enid's précis of her favourite poem entitled 'The Water Nymph and the Dragon Fly' is as follows:

The one I like best is about the nymph who lives under the water like Aqua Marina. One day she goes, Bye bye, see you later, to all her nymph friends and climbs a ladder up to the sky but she never comes back down because when she gets to the top she grows big wings and they keep making her float and won't let her go down again. It sounds sad but my mother says in the poem, Now she dances on the water, or something like that. (Azzopardi 141)

The water nymph who becomes a dragon fly is neither wholly of the air element as she was once a water-dwelling creature, and now is not wholly of the water, having wilfully abandoned it to explore beyond it. Like Maria the poet / mother, she is a liminal creature who knows both worlds; water and air, women's language and logocentric language, alive and dead. Both exist on the periphery, refusing to accept binary oppositions and instead embracing interstices.

This border country is a positive space as Enid perceptively notes, commenting on the nymph's inability to return to her watery home, 'It sounds sad but my mother says in the poem, Now she dances on the water' (Azzopardi 141). The qualifying 'but' implies that the nymph glories in her liminal state. Dancing on the water, she is now a figure for the female artist, expressing her selfhood through movement; with her feet on the water's surface and her wings in the air.

As a poet and a mother she invites Enid, as well as all women, mothers, writing women, and writing mothers, to join her in the no-space, to climb the ladder and grow wings and dance with her.

However, just as in the source tale when Enid ap Ynywl is punished for defying an interdiction to speak, Enid Bracchi must understand that the power at the tip of her tongue comes with responsibility and consequences. Power of lexis is accompanied by a potential violence and whenever words fail, action must ensue. If Geraint does not heed Enid's pleas to be left alone, then she has permission to use her fists to attack him, to 'punch his lights out' (Azzopardi 75). Azzopardi presents a scene reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, when John Reed throws a book at Jane's head (Brontë 7) causing Jane to defend herself by word and fist. When Enid demands that Geraint return the poetry collection written for her by her mother, the hurled book connects with her head causing an outpouring of rage, violence and blood. Enid reports,

I don't even duck, because I am totally crazed now. The corner gets me on my head but I don't feel it one bit because I am killing Geraint on his bed. I'm smashing his face with my fists and he's laughing for a second and then he's going Stop! Stop! But he's still laughing so I won't stop killing him. Then he gets both my arms and grabs them so I can't reach his face but I'll just kick him to pieces instead but he looks at me and he goes, Oh, Shit!

Then I see all the blood all over everything where my head has burst. (Azzopardi 127)

In the source tale, when Geraint lies seemingly dead, Enid ap Ynywl refuses to obey her rescuing knight and gets a 'clout on the ear' (S. Davies 174). Her cries of pain rouse Geraint from his half-dead torpor and he cleaves the attacking knight in two. Despite vocalising their right to agency both Enid Bracchi and Enid ap

Ynywl discover that vocalising a selfhood comes with pursuant responsibilities and consequences.

Trezza Azzopardi's *The Tip of My Tongue* works to uncover the complex tensions between agency and powerlessness suggested in *The Mabinogion*'s 'Geraint son of Erbin' but explores such tensions by focussing on language and motherhood as a site of power. Consequently, she emphasises the potency of all story-telling traditions by interweaving fairy tales and myth tales whilst exploring concepts of maternal authority and power over language. Azzopardi interrogates not only who has the right to speak but also the paradigms of power which underpin all language. In this way, Azzopardi undertakes a similar task to those feminist and postcolonial writers who strike at the heart of myth tales as they seek to impose control through silencing and effacing narratives.

This is obliquely traced through Enid and her use of proper noun and adjective capitalisation. In the novella's opening page she declares her ambition 'to be an International Spy [...] gathering information by being sneaky and using [...] special powers to [her] Utmost Advantage as A Champion of Law and Order and Justice' (Azzopardi 13). By claiming authority as a (pre-pubescent) woman, as a writing woman and as writing Welsh woman, Enid does enact covert subversion of patriarchy's logos, so that she is 'A Champion of Law and Order and Justice', but by the end she has positively re-signified these concepts so that they symbolise her female experience of language and the maternal. This is indicated on the novella's last page in which Enid and Geraint establish a truce. Geraint represents the androcentric centre which seeks to silence Enid and it is significant that Enid recalls her mother's instructions. Referencing Christian and

Classical myth, Enid says, ‘But then I remember it is Christmas and my mother always says you must have Peace and Good Will to All Men even if he is your Nemesis’ (Azzopardi 183). This maternal prompt, in the present tense with capitalised proper nouns and adjectives, allows Enid to manage this new lexicon, and to choose her battles wisely. In the text’s afterword, Azzopardi reveals how important it was for her to give Enid the last word – ‘Deal!’ (Azzopardi 183); a single word which indicates negotiation of authority through language exchange.

### Tishani Doshi’s *Fountainville* (2013)

The following discussion of Tishani Doshi’s *Fountainville* presents a feminist-postcolonial reading in order to draw out its interrogation of paradigms which silence and exclude indigenous communities and, particularly, the women of those communities. Within her retelling of the Welsh source tale taken from *The Mabinogion*, ‘The Lady of the Well’, also titled ‘The Lady of the Fountain’, Doshi’s protagonist, Luna, flags up the interchangeable terms within the text saying, ‘Fountain is just a prettier way of saying *Well* – with a marble slab over it’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 23). Luna is based on a female character, Luned the handmaiden, whose voice is a major influence in the events of the source tale, despite the title privileging her mistress, the Lady. The tale also focuses on Owain, a knight who must journey on a quest for knowledge as is conventional in the chivalric romance genre. In *The Mabinogion*, ‘The Lady of the Well’ remains silent but it is Luned who, through her own vocalised agency, controls the destiny of Owain and the Lady.

In the Welsh source tale (S. Davies 116 – 138), the warrior Cynon tells a story of a magic fountain and its fearless Black Knight protector. Owain decides to seek them out for himself so that he may vanquish the Black Knight and prove himself to be a more successful knight than Cynon. Owain begins his journey and is directed to the fountain by a giant with one eye and one foot. Once at the fountain, and its adjacent tree, he had been instructed by the giant to throw water over the marble slab covering its aperture, then a tremendous hail storm would nearly kill him. If he survived, a flock of birds would alight upon the tree, sing, and the Black Knight would attack. Owain threw the water and fought the Black Knight, dealing him a fatal blow, upon which the knight fled to his castle nearby, with Owain pursuing him.

Owain then becomes trapped between portcullises which closed upon the Black Knight's entry. Luned the handmaiden smuggles Owain into the castle and advises the Lady of the castle, who is also the Lady of the Fountain and consort to the Black Knight, to find a suitable protector for both herself and the fountain now that she is widowed. Luned suggests Owain as a suitor. The Lady agrees to the match and they are married. Owain defends the fountain for three years until Arthur seeks him out. He returns to Arthur's court for three years and forgets about his responsibilities at the fountain and castle, until Luned arrives to remind him. Luned leaves and Owain sets out to find the castle once more. During the return journey he is rescued by maidens, rescues Earls' daughters, kills monsters, befriends a lion, kills a snake, and releases Luned who has been encased in stone whilst her tormentors prepare to burn her alive. He and Luned arrive at the castle to collect the Lady and her retinue, before returning to Arthur's court.

In Doshi's version the first-person narrative is voiced by Luna, a young woman born in Fountainville, a small town in Nagaland, on the margins of North East India; her narrative is situated in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. Etymologically, the name Luna is Latin for the Moon-goddess who is closely connected to water and 'existed all alone in primordial time, until she tired of loneliness and decided to create a world' (Walker 556). Christians claimed that worshippers of Luna were insane; consequently the word 'lunatic' entered common usage (Walker 556). As we will see, lunacy, water, birth and a shift from loneliness to companionship underscore Luna's narrative in *Fountainville*. Furthermore, Doshi's Luna is based on Luned in the source tale, and tracing the etymology of the Welsh Luned reveals that it is a version of Eluned, meaning 'many desires' (Grufudd 68). It is also a form of Lyn which can be traced to Scottish Gaelic 'linne', meaning 'deep pool or lake' ([www.faclair.com](http://www.faclair.com)). In Welsh, 'llyn' is a lake, 'llun' is an image, and 'dydd Llun' is Monday ([www.geiriadur.net](http://www.geiriadur.net)), with its origins in 'day of the moon' (*OED*). In Old English 'lynn' is a ship ([www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk](http://www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk)). Again, motifs of water and the moon are discernible, but through the Welsh/Scottish traditions, there are also references to travel, desires, and communication where meaning is translated through image.

Doshi retells the source tale by rewriting Luned as Luna, whose first-person account narrates Doshi's re-imagining, giving depth and motivation to an undervalued woman in *Fountainville*'s source, 'The Lady of the Well'. Although Luned is an agent and a dissenting voice, whose voice and actions are pivotal to the action of 'The Lady and the Well', she is not acknowledged as a central

character. The source tale is, first and foremost, a heroic romance focussed upon Owain, a knight whose future in Arthur's court depends on his quest's success. Unlike Geraint's questing, women characters are peripheral to Owain's journey.

In Doshi's re-vision, Luna and her relationship with Owain (she agrees to bear him a child) are central to the narrative, whereas in the source tale the relationship's significance is implicit, with importance placed on Owain's actions and reactions to situations born out of that relationship, for example when Luned suggests marriage to the Lady, when she comes to Arthur's court to remind him of his guardian responsibilities, and when he must save her from being burned after defending his honourable reputation (S. Davies 131, 134, 136). Luned says of Owain, 'he was the friend I think I loved best in the whole world' (S. Davies 134) and it is this relationship, as well as Luned's agency and voice that Doshi foregrounds through Luna.

Not only does Nagaland (in the outer region of North East India) provide Doshi with the imagined topography of Fountainville, but also the sociological context. Fountainville, as a marginal borderland, houses all that the civilised centre denies – prostitution, child trafficking, drug abuse, poverty, mental illness; it is a temporal and metaphorical wild zone (Showalter 262). Luna refers to the uncivilised context of the town when she encounters Rafi, the giant, violently abusing his dogs that still adore him despite their ill-treatment. Luna shouts, 'You should be happy you don't live in a civilised place' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 38).

Fountainville is controlled by Mob bosses, pimps and drug cartels, with Begum (Luna's foster-mother and businesswoman) traversing this delicately balanced hierarchy. According to the *OED* 'begum' is a generic name given to

married Muslim women of high status and originates from the Turkish word for princess, thus drawing parallels with the Lady in Doshi's source tale. In English translation, Begum would be called Lady or Princess. As owners of an unregulated surrogate pregnancy business, Begum and Luna, as the Lady and her handmaiden, operate within the gaps of this lawless society. They offer the most disenfranchised inhabitants of Fountainville, its women, an element of control and respite through paying them to bear children for childless clients.

This is not exactly a fairy tale resolution but a realistic answer to a violent and uncaring society. Faced with limited options in a limiting society, the women will use whatever tools are available to them to survive, not least Begum, who is married to the incumbent Mobster boss, Kedar. Together with his army of thugs he controls the fortunes of Fountainville; he is a 'fixer – a man in the know with an ear to the town's drug-dealers, hit-men, government officials, elders, pastor and policemen. His services ranged from the quotidian to the grotesque. [Card] tables, pimping girls and dope all fell under his sway' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 80).

On a fateful trip to the Mainland to attend their son's graduation, Luna's parents leave her in Kedar and Begum's care, a situation which becomes permanent when Luna's family die on the return coach journey. After a few years, through Luna's adolescence, Begum's idea of starting a surrogate fertility clinic in Fountainville is born from her watching a documentary on India's newest economical sector; that of private fertility and surrogacy services. Luna recounts how Begum and Kedar quickly identify the opportunity to fill the niche market:



A woman in the Mainland – Dr Joy Philipose, had been running a clinic for two years where she outsourced pregnancies. The TV talk show host, adored and syndicated around the world, called it fertility tourism.

‘Isn’t that what you’re doing?’ the talk show host asked, ‘Offering wombs for rent?’

Wealthy clients from foreign countries, where the science was in place but not the law, were visiting Dr Philipose’s clinic in droves. Dr Philipose had become a millionaire, but she sat there as pious as a nun, [...] saying, ‘This isn’t about making money for me. The greatest joy is to help couples who can’t have children of their own; to enable women of my country, who have so little, to have greater freedom in their lives.’

‘Don’t you see?’ Begum said, ‘The clever old cow.’ (Doshi *Fountainville*, 87)

Soon after, Begum launches her own clinic and within months her success dwarfs that of Dr Philipose.

Owain Knight arrives in Fountainville, drawn by his wish to be a father. He and Luna become friends and she agrees to become a surrogate mother to his child; she becomes one of the ‘proxies’ of the clinic which she had been managing for Begum. Begum’s enterprise has far reaching impacts for the region as she uses her newly realised prominence to raise awareness of Fountainville’s social deprivations: ‘she brought prosperity to these Borderlands and forced the government in the Mainland to take up [...] long-neglected issues. Besides, she made more money in a month than Kedar did in six, but none of this bothered him’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 91). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that:

the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature (shaped by reductionist modern science since the sixteenth century) and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women that prevails in most patriarchal societies, even modern industrial ones, [are] closely connected. (3)

There is obviously more money to be made in the questionable business of exploiting women and their ‘wombs for rent’ than in Kedar’s more traditional exploitative practices of pimping, drug dealing and protection racketeering.

Whilst Begum does attempt to address the social deprivation and the ‘exploitative and oppressive relationship between women and men’ (Mies and Shiva 3) during Kedar’s regime, she is also engaged in exploiting the women, the ‘proxies’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 55) who attend her clinic. Begum endorses and enables the fertile women of Fountainville (and its neighbouring towns) to rent out their reproductive organs, in a manner just slightly more refined than the local ‘whores standing on balconies with their tits hanging out’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 43).

Luna notes how, ‘Every one of [the proxies] calculates what they will do with the money before they’ve got it. [...] Begum and I try to foster a sense of sisterhood [...], the idea that they’re working towards a greater good, and that money should not be their only motivation’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 54). Begum’s proxies are not the eco-feminist earth mothers marketed to Occidental clients; their behaviour is regulated by the ‘Fountainville Guidelines for Proxies’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 55) which suggests that the women are not entirely convinced of Luna and Begum’s ethos of sisterhood. Guideline 9 reads: ‘Gambling, smoking, drinking and unauthorised drugs will not be tolerated’ and guideline 11 adds: ‘Any proxy found engaging in ganging up on, or bullying another proxy will be forced to terminate the contract and prevented from further engagement with the clinic’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 56). There is an intrinsic tension within the clinic where the women seek to oppress and subject other women; the proxies imitate

their wider experiences even within the women-only, matriarchal enclave of the clinic.

Ecofeminism is not embraced by the proxies, but medical science and the mythic narratives surrounding the town's fountain are. Like the mother-ship / Blodeuwedd / Nona in Lewis's *The Meat Tree*, myth and technology commingle on the site of motherhood. Again motherhood, imaged through the clinic's proxies, is not entirely positive. It is more selfish, animalistic and competitive. Like the ship, the proxies will cause harm should they have the opportunity. However, *The Mabinogion*'s mythic narrative, represented by the town's fountain and the daily rituals performed there, assuage and camouflage potential for such female violence.

Luna and Begum labour under a hypocrisy whereby unmitigated monetary gain underpins the entire operation set up by Begum who has drawn her inspiration from Dr Philipose the, 'clever old cow' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 87). Begum saw straight to the profitable heart of Dr Philipose's business and used the money from her husband's pimping and prostitution rackets to set up a business not very dissimilar. Just as Dr Philipose sits 'pious as a nun' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 87) stating egalitarian purposes of empowering impoverished women, Begum officiates at fertility ceremonies at the fountain. In the opening paragraph of the novella, the theory of the fountain's medicinal qualities is explained by Luna, who says: 'Go to Fountainville, and you'll be cured of all your problems. Arrive there barren, tired, deprived, mad, washed out with nowhere else to go, and you might be restored' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 17). Women worshipped and tended the fountain 'because they understood its magic' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 19). Drawing

on visual cues by ‘wearing her official robes, the one she brought out for special functions’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 108) Begum elicits myth narratives to exhort the proxies to drink from the fountain once a day. Begum uses the reputation of the life-giving and curative powers of the fountain’s water to her own business advantage.

Myth is used to console and camouflage processes scientifically controlled and patrolled (the proxies are pregnant through *in vitro* fertilisation (I.V.F.) and are cared for by a male gynaecologist). Luna comments on how Begum presents herself when officiating the myth, saying, ‘When she dressed like that she was her most beautiful self – Goddess-like, overflowing’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 108). Both Dr Philipose and Begum exploit advancements in science to fill a niche business market, and both use the language of myth, social improvement and gender equality to ratify their business ventures. Luna describes the inception of the business:

It was Begum who discovered the fountain’s deeper secrets and entrusted it to our women. She drew them out of the fields where they broke their backs [...], from sweat shops where they ruined their eyes and fingers [...] but when they heard about the magic, they came from across the mountains and from the seaside too. (Doshi, *Fountainville* 20)

Fountainville women replace one form of exploitative manual labour for another and are consoled (Carter, *Sadeian* 5) through their engagement with myth.

Begum, it seems, becomes the more successful of the two ‘wombs for rent’ entrepreneurs because of her canny invocation of local mythology related to the fountain. She recognises the intrinsic connection between it and the Fountainville

women, and identifies the marketing potential of the fountain. Like *The Meat Tree*'s assimilating predatory mother-ship / Nona / Blodeuwedd, she recognises humanity's yearning for a qualifying narrative, and seeks to provide it. Luna says:

Belief is a powerful thing, which is why when Begum set up operations she incorporated the fountain as a central part of the process. 'Everyone likes to believe in something outside the limitations of their own bodies,' Begum always said. 'Here, at Fountainville, we can offer that miracle.' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 24)

Fountainville can offer the narrative, it can offer belief. The proxies and the foreign surrogate parents buy into the idea, exalting the magic of birth and obfuscating the underpinning medical science. By drawing upon mythic fertility narratives associated with the fountain in order to engage with how they may be used to justify women's subjection whilst consoling subjected women, Doshi has presented myth as 'consolatory nonsenses' (Carter, *Sadeian* 5).

The women of the Borderlands literally ingest the myth through drinking the fountain's waters every evening. However, that is not to suggest a negative reading of *Fountainville* and its revision; on the contrary, the narrative presents a tacitly complex engagement with Welsh myth and its function. Luna recounts the experience of their first proxy, Asmara, a local farmer's wife who walked into the clinic and announced, 'I hear you pay five thousand [...] I'll take half of that' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 57). Asmara now earns her own money from her own endeavours, has respite from her life of back-breaking and soul-breaking poverty, and receives free medical care. The clinic offers Fountainville women a gynocentric mythic narrative which helps them to 'know themselves [and] understand their lives (Doshi, *Fountainville* 125). It also offers practical help,

such as respite from oppressive families and marriages, and poverty. It offers education, leisure time, free medical care and allows women to experience woman-only communal living. There are colonial implications to this respite, however.

Discussing her re-imagining at the Hay on Wye Literature Festival (2014), Doshi recognises a parity of cultural experience between North East India – Nagaland – and Wales. Fountainville, the fictional town drawn from Doshi's real-life experiences of the North Indian border region is offered as a parallel to Wales or, more specifically, the Welsh condition as a colonised internal state of an imperialist economic and political sovereignty. Despite Doshi's statement that the 'original myth is so wonderfully unspecific in its geography that it allowed [...] the rare freedom of writing about anywhere' (Doshi, 'Afterword' 193), the experiences of the people who inhabit the geographies of Wales and North Eastern India are, for Doshi, markedly similar.

Doshi collapses boundaries between the mythic Wales of *The Mabinogion*, Wales post-Act of Union (1536), and North East India. This chimes with Kate D'Lima's short story, 'Branwen', in which she suggests a similar parallel between Wales and Bangladesh. In *Fountainville*, Wales and the borderlands of India share similar experiences of subjection and exist in a state of subaltern otherness, compared to a ruling metropolis. Doshi further explores this elision by reflecting upon the gendered experience of the colonial subject, specifically women of Wales and peripheral India. At the Hay on Wye Literature Festival (2014), Doshi commented upon her gathering of research material for her remythification of 'The Lady of the Well' and how it occurred to her that Welsh and Indian women's

experiences were/are analogous ('Women in *The Mabinogion*'). Doshi situates Welsh myth in Northern East India, a disputed and tenuous principality, an internal colony. She draws firm parallels between Welsh and Indian women's subjection within their colonised culture. Myth, and women's relationship with the effaced narratives of their culture, is at the centre of Doshi's conflation suggesting that women's reclamation of mythic narratives is a collective and coalescing endeavour.

Within this context, Doshi's strategies which recover and re-vision Welsh myth are similar to those of New Zealand's Keri Hulme, whom Sharon Rose Wilson identifies as a postcolonial feminist writer who engages with fairy tales, myths and folktales to comment upon the colonised female subject. Discussing Hulme's *The Bone People* (2001), Wilson suggests that 'Hulme's deconstructive, decolonising, and postcolonial techniques center on her use of revisioned folklore: fairy-tale and mythic intertexts' (150). Wilson also argues that Hulme demythologises, re-genders and re-centres her protagonist who is triply colonised as a woman, a Maori, and a pakeha-Maori hybrid (150). Doshi's female characters are similarly triply subjected because they are women, Indian, and inhabit the marginal outer regions of India. Luna feels this exclusion keenly; particularly as a teenager she develops a burden of shame attached to both her border identity and her gender. She says of her brother achieving his degree:

The reason I hadn't gone to Newton's graduation ceremony with the rest of my family was because I was ashamed. Isn't a fourteen year old allowed to be unreasonable about her indignities? I didn't want to travel in that beat-up bus with our beat-up peasant clothes and beat-up suitcase, to arrive in the Mainland only to be told: *Hey Chinky, why don't you make us some chop-suey?* Newton had written about his difficulties in his letters

home. He hadn't held a thing back – all the dirty things those Mainlanders called him – his landlady, the taxi drivers, even some of his professors, who were so surprised about his mathematical abilities. (Doshi, *Fountainville* 39)

Not only does *Fountainville* use Welsh myth to uncover the subjection of women, but it seeks to expose the workings of misogynist centripetal regimes which subjugate women. In this way, the text 'indicate[s] the quality and nature of characters' cultural contexts [and signifies] characters' – and readers' – entrapment in pre-existing patterns' (Wilson 161). Due to Doshi's conflation of Welsh and North East Indian experiences of colonisation, just as comment is passed upon the subjection of the women in *Fountainville*, so too is comment passed on the subjection of Welsh women.

That is not to suggest, however, that Welsh women require a bloody revolution to emancipate themselves from social vassalage as their counterparts in *Fountainville*, rather what they share is the need for a tacit stratagem for the unmasking of forces which exclude and violate women. This is key to Welsh women's (and all women's) empowerment. Doshi engages with the elements of the Welsh source tale which allow such a comment to be made – such comments directly come from the Lady of the Well's Welsh handmaiden, Luned, who (like Enid) refuses to be silent.

Sara Mills, in her monograph on *Gender and Colonial Space* (2005), comments upon the colonising processes and discourses which doubly subject women within a colonial context arguing that,

different groups of women have experienced, constructed and have been allocated different spatial relations. Different classes of women at various



times in history have had to be chaperoned in the public sphere, have seen the public sphere as a place of potential sexual attack and have been taught to consider the domestic as a less powerful place, which is largely the domain of females. However, this does not mean to say that all women have simply accepted these views; they have, in fact, negotiated within those constraints. (33)

This accords with Diane Purkiss' analysis of Luce Irigaray's theory of femininity which suggests that the feminine is a product of culture and language and is defined by what is excluded from patriarchal representations, so that it 'can only be glimpsed in their gaps and silences' (Purkiss 448). Begum and Luna of Doshi's *Fountainville*, and Luned of its source tale, are exemplars of how women operate within the 'gaps and silences' of repressive regimes whereby all three autonomously instigate events within their respective tales and vocalise their own agency.

*Fountainville* engages with its source tale of 'The Lady of the Fountain' by exploring how women are vulnerable within the public sphere of the wider metropolis, that is, despite Luned being a vocal autonomous agency she is still punished for speaking out: she is encased in rock and nearly burned to death. Doshi poses Luna / Luned as a vocal autonomous agency within her redaction, but this time within the Mainland's periphery. Within this space, Luna and the *Fountainville* women are more acutely vulnerable in the marginal 'wild zones' because they are not chaperoned as they are in the public sphere at the centre of the metropolis. Women within the margins cannot rely on a rescuing knight as Luned does in the source tale, but have to engender their own rescue; they have to negotiate their own survival terms and strategies. After Marra's Army have

deposed Kedar, Marra attempts to initiate a trade deal with Begum, a deal thinly disguised as a protection racket:

‘It’s very simple,’ [Marra] said, ‘you keep a fourth of everything you were making and continue to run the place exactly as it was before, with full protection offered by us. My men will step back.’ [...]

‘Take it all,’ Begum said. ‘I have no interest in running my clinic for other people. And you haven’t the first clue how to do it yourself.’

‘You are not irreplaceable,’ Marra smiled. ‘I’m only offering it to you as a courtesy. [...] You understand well, I think, the laws of survival. Do not make me teach them to you. Good day.’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 124)

Here then, Marra acknowledges Begum’s autonomy as a legitimate business owner but seeks to coerce her into giving up the majority of her profits to his criminal regime. If Begum is to continue to operate she must negotiate terms with Marra or she must relinquish the clinic. She chooses the latter and sends the proxies home.

Under Kedar’s rule, women did survive within the ‘gaps and silences’ of the margins, but under Marra’s regime there is no hope for any female autonomy. In the aftermath of the coup, Begum is unchaperoned and at her most vulnerable. Describing her humbled circumstance, she says, ‘Now I’m just another woman from the Borderlands with a sad story to tell’ (Doshi, *Fountainville* 126). This demonstrates how when there is ‘conflict between two opposing forces it is always women who are most vulnerable’ (Wallace “Mixed Marriages” 175). However, as in the source tale, Doshi does provide Luna and Begum with a happy ending.

For Wilson, postcolonial feminist metamyths often change the traditional romance resolution so that marriage is not the end of the woman’s story, or they often explode and open resolution, as they (in Du Plessis’ phrase) ‘write beyond

the ending' (162). Doshi offers such an open resolution whereby Luna and Begum live communally in a 'new paradigm of family' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 176). Luna and Owain's child is born into this community and is 'remarkably unconcerned about the fact that he has four mothers and four fathers. The love of his life is his sister, Pearl' (Doshi, *Fountainville* 175) who was also born via a proxy (Chanu Rose) within hours of his own birth, and is his half-sister. Here Doshi presents a resolution which does not allow marriage to be the end of the women's stories. What Doshi presents is more interesting because the ending of *Fountainville* more closely resembles the source tale, whereby Owain, the Lady, Luned and their retinue live together in Arthur's Court at the tale's conclusion. Medieval traditions of communities living as one collective under the protection of an overlord are repeated, but are re-centred so that the collective, or 'family', whilst living communally is more matriarchal, or is gender-equal. However, within Doshi's redaction the tiered family does not leave the fountain; for Doshi, in having the family remain loyal to the fountain a flaw in the original is redressed. Doshi states, 'I knew that in my version, the fountain's keepers would remain loyal, that no amount of luring from distant lands could unsteady them' ('Afterword' 189).

My postcolonial-feminist reading of the text reveals how, in situating her Welsh mythic intertext within an Indian context, Doshi recognises parallels between Wales and India as colonised cultures, and between Welsh and Indian women as colonised subalterns; she uncovers scars left by colonising processes which demanded women be 'essential and overworked servant[s] [...] worn to the bone' (Aaron, 'A review' 205). This re-centring of the Welsh source tale, which draws parallels between Welsh and Northern East Indian postcolonial contexts,

signals a more complex engagement with Welsh myth than just plot, narrator perspective and gender. Interrogations of postcolonial paradigms in both contexts ensure that Doshi's metamyth 'rewrite[s] the discourses of myth while rewriting individual' myth (Purkiss 448). *Fountainville's* comparison of Welsh and Indian women's subjection within their colonised culture suggests that Doshi's postcolonial interrogation of the discourses of myth does not 'allow the truth of woman to be located in an individual myth, or the truth of myth in an individual woman' (Purkiss 454). However, a recuperation of both myth and misogynist social paradigms is implied where using Welsh myth within a contemporary North East Indian setting 'connect[s] to the old, wise stories where magical transformation, rebirth, and healing are again possible' (Wilson 163).

### Conclusion

Trezza Azzopardi and Tishani Doshi have turned Welsh chivalric romance tales into Welsh feminist quest fictions, similar to more complex engagements with gynocentric writing, where the 'writer/heroine, often guided by another woman, travels to the "mother country" of liberated desire and female authenticity' (Showalter 263). Instead of being a learning aid for the male hero who undergoes a transformation, the women undertake a learning journey themselves by valuing their own efforts, voices and influences in their families, communities and the wider world.

In Dafydd and Azzopardi's novellas, there are correlations between mother and child, motherhood and storytelling, voice and power, and voice and survival. For Azzopardi's Maria, it is vital for her daughter Enid to recognise

these correlations, and to adjust her social behaviours and reactions accordingly. Maria intends to educate her daughter through the ‘social stratagem’ (Warner, *Beast* 237) of fairy tale, myth tale, and poetry. By the novella’s conclusion we see that Enid is progressing towards maturity, but her metaphoric transformation from water nymph to dragonfly will not be witnessed by the reader.

At the conclusion of Doshi’s narrative, Begum and Luna, for example, are free to establish their benign matriarchy founded upon gynocentric paradigms. Once the ‘exploitative dominance’ (Mies and Shiva 3) of Marra’s Army is neutralised, Begum and Luna evolve a libertarian community in which men and women, nature and industry, technology and ecology exist in a newly egalitarian Fountainville.

Wilson argues that ‘metamyths remythify intertexts distorted or amputated by colonisation, racism, and patriarchy, potentially healing societies. [Mythic] intertexts thus foreground sexual politics and other political issues’ (163). Writers who rework mythologies often give voice to the silenced. However, the most rewarding writing comes from those who seek to uncover the powers which are accountable for the silencing of those voices. *The Mabinogion* often features women who refuse to stay silent and who vocalise disparity, cruelty and unfairness, regardless of the consequences. Doshi and Azzopardi engage with such women where Enid Bracchi and Luna function to interrogate the contemporaneous patriarchal praxes which would silence and subject them. Both Doshi and Azzopardi fruitfully engage with the Welsh myth tales and provide us with female characters who question the repressive functions of myth and who

understand the complexities and dangers of voice in a world which would enforce their silence.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis I argued that when Welsh women writers choose to engage with Welsh myth, fairy and folk narratives they recover such narratives for their readership and in their rewriting of those narratives, often engage with misogynist and imperialist hegemonies. Such engagement can uncover these hegemonies both in the source material and in the contemporary socio-political and cultural contexts from which the women write. As this thesis has demonstrated, in Welsh women's Anglophone recoveries of Welsh source material, there is often a re-centring so that the previously marginalised is now centripetal or there is a reclamation of marginal spaces so that the wild zone is figured as positively gynocentric.

Furthermore, when engaging with Welsh myth traditions, re-centring and reclamation activities which interrogate myth narratives as repositories of universal truths are situated in wider feminist and postcolonial revisionist activities. These wider revisionist activities query the androcentric veneration of misogynist and imperialist myth traditions and thus Welsh women's engagement with Welsh myth narratives are placed on a world stage. Therefore, when interrogating Welsh myth traditions in the early decades of the twentieth century, Hilda Vaughan is engaged in recovery activities similar to those of H.D. and Virginia Woolf, while in the latter half of the twentieth century – and beginning of the twenty-first century – Imogen Rhia Herrad, Catherine Merriman, and Tishani Doshi are engaged in similar recovery activities to those of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Keri Hulme. This thesis has demonstrated that, like their

peers, Welsh women writers have often reworked Welsh myth and folk tale traditions to scrutinise power balances between genders and nations from a specifically Welsh context.

Over the twentieth century, as I have argued, there is a paradigmatic shift in how source material is reworked whereby writers query how far myth traditions are monolithic narratives which hold venerated truths of civilisation. At the beginning of the twentieth century these truths are uncovered and interrogated through a revision of the narratives in which they are encoded. Towards the end of the century, after the emergence of second-wave feminism and postcolonial critical theories, the status of myth itself is questioned. As a result there are often complex engagements with voice, identity, culture and nation which transect their mythic narratives.

Chapter two illustrates how Hilda Vaughan uncovers Welsh myth as a monolithic male construct to be exposed as an oppressive regime as per all mythos. Vaughan endorses Welsh myth as a monolithic narrative when she reinstates its status in order critically to challenge patriarchal paradigms underpinning the Welsh tradition, as they do the Classical canon. For Vaughan, Welsh myth is as legitimate a target for ‘displacing the “truth” of traditional texts and patterns’ (Wilson 7) as Homer’s *The Iliad* is for H.D. Thus Hilda Vaughan treats the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi* as a tool of patriarchal control and colonisation of Welsh women.

As I have shown in chapter three, Alice Thomas Ellis engages with Welsh myth and folkloric traditions as they incorporate, and echo, Judeo-Christian mysticism and her rigid conservative Catholicism. Ellis’s personal belief system is



underpinned by the immutability of Welsh narrative traditions that confirm Welsh mysticism. Catholic writers, Ruth Whittaker argues, ‘have an impatience with realism because they are anxious to convince the reader not of the recognizable, ordinary world, but rather to make us believe in and respond to the extraordinary’ (4). Ellis sees Welsh mythic and folkloric traditions as evidence of heaven on earth, an eternal presence to which humans must attune themselves. Here, then, Welsh folklore is absolutely monolithic.

In chapters four and five I argued that Welsh women’s Anglophone short stories and poetry which revision Welsh myth and folklore, reflect shifts in feminist and postcolonial discourses. Poems and short fiction published at the end of the twentieth century, and in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, interrogate Welsh nationhood by exploring dichotomies at the centre of Welsh identity. Raymond Williams has argued that a Welsh response to dissolution and identity has been to try to make, or remake, communities and identities (30) and this has not changed despite the ratification of the Welsh Government. Since the Government of Wales Act (2006), Wales’s political identity has never been so coherent, but this coherence is not necessarily reflected in Welsh women’s engagement with Welsh myth. At the beginning of a new millennium, and at a time of devolved Welsh governance, Welsh women poets and short story writers who draw on Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales emerge from literary, theoretical, and socio-historic contexts which have been deconstructing hegemonic paradigms since the Victorian *fin de siècle*. They have received and read their instructions for survival and are now evolving their own mythic cycles.

In chapter six, I argued that Gwyneth Lewis reworks myth through presenting the tale of Blodeuwedd and Lleu from *The Mabinogi* as something which attunes to humanity. For Lewis, Welsh myth is presented as a parasite which must alter according to its host – the human imagination. It is not a venerated repository of truth, rather it is a crucible, or a Cauldron of Rebirth which spews out re-animated narratives. Such metamorphosis, symbolised by new flowerings of the meat tree, can be viewed as the *sine qua non* motif of *The Meat Tree*. The endurance of Welsh myth depends upon its perpetual adaption. Champion recognises that myth has evolved from the confines of the VR suite and has entered a new phase of story-telling, a new frontier of interaction with humanity's psyche. He states:

Now that we can hear each other's thoughts, even if we're in separate rooms, I've given up on the Synapse Log and Joint Thought Channel. It's enough to observe how the story unfolds.

Each day I wait until I hear the scrap of a voice, a clue. Then Nona and I – or should I say Blodeuwedd and Lleu? – start talking. And so what we are begins to take shape. (G. Lewis, *Meat Tree* 184)

Welsh myth now directly enters humanity's psyche; it no longer dwells in the subconscious to be accessed piecemeal, along a psychological journey, by a slowly maturing consciousness. It will instead take over the conscious mind, fusing itself directly onto the imagination of its hosts, whether they are ready for its truths or not.

In chapter seven, I argue that Fflur Dafydd, Trezza Azzopardi and Tishani Doshi each interrogate notions of self, voice, gender and nationhood in their contributions to Seren Press's New Stories from *The Mabinogion*. Published in the second decade of the new millennium, the Seren novellas do not accept the

tales from *The Mabinogion* as monolithic narratives. Each writer flags up the shifting identities and power plays in their source tale, but it is Doshi who most overtly reworks *The Mabinogion* in order to expose colonial tenets at the centre of mythic traditions by drawing parallels between Welsh and Indian women as victims of those colonial tenets. Doshi posits a new regime and a recuperation of Welsh myth: her text is also, therefore, an example of how twenty-first-century women writers build on literary, theoretical and socio-historic foundations laid by their foremothers. Within Doshi's *Fountainville* it is the women who are proprietors of myth and it is their loyalty to the myth which allows not only for a questioning of phallocentric rationale, but a revolution which supplants the region's patriarchal paradigm, replacing it with a gynocentric beau ideal.

When Donald Haase suggested that the new millennium presented an opportunity 'to draw a new map of the field' (ix) of fairy tale scholarship, he posed specific modes of future enquiry that might inform this new map and encourage new critical approaches. I indicated that a purpose of this thesis was to consider Welsh women's engagement with Welsh myth, fairy and folk tales as an act of recovering neglected works within a Western culture. Through interrogating the texts selected for analysis, my discussions have necessarily presented readings of source Welsh folk and myth traditions.

However, in exploring how Welsh women writers interrogate notions of self, gender and nation within their recovery of Welsh myth, folk and fairy tales, this thesis' main concern has been to assess the impact of feminist and postcolonial identities on the way contemporary Welsh women writers experience their gender and nation. As Welsh women's experiences have evolved, so too

have their engagements with Welsh myth and folklore, so that in the second decade of the twenty-first century these Welsh women writers, like Beagan's prophetic Kia and Herrad's Rhiannon, are not only refocusing Welsh mythic pasts, but also writing Welsh mythic futures.

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